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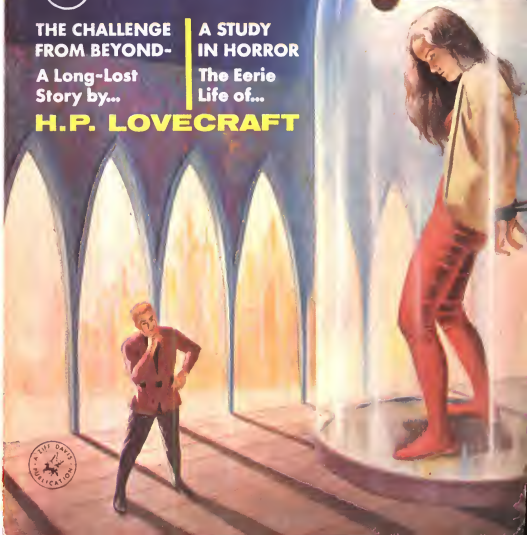
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Cover: JOHN DUILLO

Illustrating "Fireman"



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# Editorial

THE Astronauts had some good and bad news recently.

The good news was a picture window on outer space. According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the vehicle in which the lucky Astronaut rides will be equipped with a trapezoid-shaped pane of glass that will not only permit panoramic vision of space, but withstand 2,000 degrees F.

The design of the window, being fabricated by the Corning Glass Co., was suggested by the Astronauts themselves, who said they'd hate to have to see what was doing Outside just through two measley portholes and a periscope—which were the original plans. The window has four panes of glass, varies in width from  $7\frac{1}{2}$  to 11 inches, and will be 21 inches high.

Its construction is also an interesting commentary on those old fogies who used to laugh at science-fiction spaceships with those control-room viewplates. "Why," sneered the old fogies, "no kind of window could stand up under the pressures and temperatures of outer space!"

The bad news was voiced by Dr. Zdenek Kopal—whom you might think was a Rigelian or an Arcturian, but who actually is a professor at England's Manchester University. Dr. Kopal thinks the decay of radioactive particles bombarding the moon might have built up a positive electric charge that exists to a height of as much as 30 feet. For evidence, he adduces the profile of the "echo" of radio waves from the moon. It is a "smooth" echo—one that would be reflected from a level surface, not from the jagged visible surface of the moon.

What would such a charge do to an explorer plummeting into it? Dr. Kopal was not prepared to say, beyond the fact that he "would not like to make a personal investigation."—NL

*Varden was a dictator, Kane was an idiot, and Ballerd was a louse. At least, that was the way it looked before somebody sent for the . . .*

# FIREMAN

By J. F. BONE

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

THE last witness had been excused. Prosecution and Defense had made their closing arguments. And in the cold gray juror room in Varden City Ernst Ballerd sat alone thoughtfully staring into the double bank of lenses that would transmit his image and his decision to viewscreens of the world. Responsibility weighed heavily upon his stocky frame seated uncomfortably erect in the big chair, spatulate fingers tense against the padded arms. His face was drawn into hard lines, lips a thin slash above square stubborn jaw, blue eyes cold and emotionless beneath thick brows and a stiff brush of yellow hair that glittered metallically in the shadowless light.

"Not so stern, Juror Bal-

lerd," the prompter box advised softly. "Relax. Act human. You're supposed to be a juror—not a robot."

Obediently Ballerd loosened his muscles.

"That's better," the box said. "Now, sir, are you ready?"

Ballerd nodded.

The lenses in front of him glowed faintly; he was on the air.

"You have heard the evidence, Juror Ballerd," Jarl Varden's voice came from the speaker. "Are you ready to give your decision?"

"I am, sir," Ballerd said.

"Very well, Juror. Let justice be done."

Ballerd hesitated. The decision must satisfy Varden, yet give an impression of justice. A tough proposition any way



Ballerd gasped! Any man would at the sight of one-hundred *identical* women.

one looked at it. He shrugged microscopically. "Guilty," Ballerd said.

"Your recommendation, Juror?"

"Minimal erasure."

Varden's voice was with him again. "Thank you, Juror Ballerd, for your service to the Union." The speaker clicked with metallic finality.

It was over.

Ballerd sighed and rose from the chair. It was all over. Now came the tense period. He'd made his gambit. Now it was Varden's move. He walked slowly toward the door, limping a little from the old wound he'd received during the Revolution.

The door was half open when Varden's voice came from behind him. "One moment, Brother Ballerd," it said.

The wave of relief was pure pain. "Yes, sir," Ballerd said, "what do you wish?" With some satisfaction he noted that his voice was completely under control.

"You conducted yourself well, Ballerd," Varden's voice came from behind him. "With dignity. Very impressive. Very impressive, indeed. My congratulations. It was a job well-done."

"Thank you, sir," Ballerd

turned slowly. The room was empty.

"I was bothered, however." Varden's voice came from the speaker set in the wall above the desk. "The evidence was overwhelming—yet you did not recommend liquidation. Why?"

Ballerd kept his face expressionless. Varden could be observing him, even though he could not see Varden.

"The evidence was *too* overwhelming," he said. "The Union overstated its case. Several times the defense could have introduced doubt, but they failed to do so. The entire proceedings had a bad odor. It looked as though Security had muzzled the witnesses to make the case airtight. Now that's just fine for a computer—the more convincing the guilt, the more certain the verdict."

Varden sounded amused. "I told Suzuke he was overdoing it. But the man won't listen."

"I was selected as Juror to apply the human factor to the law," Ballerd went on. "And this I did. The question of Annalee Kane's guilt was of minor significance. The important thing was that one human being was sitting in judgment on another. As a result any decision I made had to be tempered with humanity.

I could not behave as a computer. Yet in the end, the result is the same. Annalee Kane is effectively eliminated."

"Excellent!" Varden said. "You interest me. Your I.D. and Sector, please."

"Ernst Ballerd, Serial EB 61437 V, Arkady Sector, Vishnu," he said. He hoped the triumph in his mind was not echoed in his voice. The delicate maneuvering to get the Juror assignment had been worth every minute of time and every credit of money he had spent.

"Thank you. Call at my office tomorrow at ten. I think you will find it interesting. Considering your efforts you deserve a suitable reward."

Ballerd was still wondering whether there was cynicism or sincerity in Varden's voice as he left the Jury Room and walked down the corridor to the rotunda just inside the main entrance. Annalee Kane was still there, sitting in her glassite cage. He had passed her every day for the past week—on public display before the curious crowds who came to see the traitor. It was a barbaric touch, hardly worthy of a civilized state. She was still there, but the spectators were gone, and in their place a ring of recorders stared with glassy lenses.

Two white-coated technicians watched the machines, occasionally lifting their eyes to the slim figure behind the transparent panels.

The implications were obvious. Hers was to be a public Judgment. His eyes widened as he saw a swift flash of fear cross her long, ugly face as force rods tightened around her pinning her immovably in the exact center of the cage. There was a terrible allegory in her straining rigidity, the personification of the helplessness of the individual against the power of the state. He stood fascinated and repelled by the rigid tableau as a silver hemisphere descended from the domed ceiling of the cage to cover her motionless head. He winced as a brief shimmer flickered over the surface of the inverted bowl.

The hemisphere rose and Ballerd's stomach churned with nausea. For the face of Annalee—the gaunt-cheeked, hard-lipped face of unattractive efficiency was gone, and in its place was a vacant mask of drooling idiocy. A thin strand of saliva ran from one corner of her loose-lipped mouth as her opaque eyes stared fixedly into space. A viewer was no substitute for the real thing, Ballerd

thought, as the technicians collected their equipment and the glassite cage sank into the floor carrying the idiot hulk of what had been the most powerful woman in the Union. A circle of flooring rose to take the cage's place. The technicians trundled their scanners off to waiting trucks. Everything was wiped clean. The rotunda was as bare and spotless as though Annalee had never been there. He felt a twinge of pity for the smashed woman. Not that it made any difference. She was through and he was rising. He shrugged. That's the way it went. Someone went out—someone else came along to take his place. And life went on. He turned slowly toward the entrance and walked heavily out into the yellow sunlight.

In a dark suit, sitting behind the black expanse of polished desk, Jarl Varden looked exactly like what he was, a ruthless, intelligent dictator who had established the Union as the government of Vishnu and placed himself at its head. In the entire Confederation there were few who could match his absolute authority and none who could match his ambition. The man was a ruler. Power radiated from him in palpable waves.

Ballard eyed him curiously—without envy.

Varden looked up and smiled, a perfunctory twitch of lips with no warmth of eyes above them.

"You're on time," he said. "The sign of an efficient mind."

The platitude grated. "Thank you, Coordinator. It is a habit of mine to be prompt," Ballard said without returning the smile. "And now, sir, let us get down to business."

The abrupt, almost insulting, approach startled Varden. He looked quizzically at the stocky man facing him. Ballard's soft exterior was deceptive.

"As you know, Brother Ballard," Varden said coldly, "the outcome of yesterday's trial left an opening on my staff."

"I was aware of that, sir."

"Your conduct throughout this case impressed me favorably. I feel that you might be induced to do staff work."

"I have a good job," Ballard said. "It's not confining and it pays well."

"But it is not the best," Varden said. "A Juror has limitations. I can offer you freedom from those limitations."

"I'm interested," Ballard said tonelessly.

"Of course you realize that you have a bad record," Varden said.

Ballerd nodded. "You could call it that. I fought you, true enough. But your crowd was not the government then. You were revolutionaries."

"And you'd support us now?"

"Of course. Personal feelings have nothing to do with my duty as a citizen. I swore to uphold the legal government, and you are the legal government of Vishnu."

Varden smiled. "Hmm. Different circumstances—different behavior—eh? A neat sophistry providing you are telling the truth."

"I lie only when necessary, sir."

"And you don't think it's necessary now?"

Ballerd nodded. "Now it would be foolish. You could check too easily."

"But could I trust you?"

"As much as you could trust anyone. More than most, I think." Ballerd's voice held exactly the right overtones.

"That we shall see," Varden said.

"That is your privilege, sir. I am at your disposal."

"You are too good to be true," Varden said with cynical accent. "The perfect sub-

ordinate. It hardly fits with what I know about you."

"Don't misconstrue me," Ballerd said evenly. "I am ambitious. I want to get ahead. I enjoy power. As a matter of fact I felt that the Annalee Kane case was my opportunity. I pulled every trick I knew to get that assignment because I was certain you'd monitor the trial and I wanted to impress you. I felt that it was worthwhile because if I succeeded I'd get preference over other power-seekers. My actions were designed deliberately to attract your attention."

Varden smiled ruefully. "They did," he said, "and they leave me with a problem. You are too clever to leave outside the government and maybe too dangerous to take in. Perhaps the simplest solution would be to liquidate you."

Ballerd said nothing, but he could feel his palms grow moist with sweat. Varden was perfectly capable of liquidating him if he decided that there was too much danger in Ballerd's existence.

"I'd like to know whether you're sincere or merely being clever," Varden went on.

"You have the equipment to find out," Ballerd said equably, "but I can save you trouble. I'm a little of both."

"Then why didn't you take over the police division before we took power? It wouldn't have been too hard. Marriner wasn't a brilliant man, and your dossier shows you were."

Ballerd shook his head. "Loyalty," he said. "Besides, he helped me get on the force."

"And you had no desire for his position?"

"Certainly, but it wasn't that important. I had the power. That was enough. I didn't need the title."

"You realize, of course, that you caused the Union a great deal of trouble. If we had known your part in it you would have probably ended up with your chief instead of getting that job as a petty Juror."

Ballerd chuckled. "There you have my reason for not wanting obvious power. A man is too exposed. As it was, Marriner had the responsibility. He made the decision to resist. It wasn't mine even though I approved of it. Possibly he wasn't too bright, but he was honest, loyal and courageous. He fought for his beliefs."

"And you were wounded—and lost your job—and had to work as a menial. Was it worth it?"

Ballerd shook his head. "No," he admitted, "it wasn't.

But that's the trouble with loyalty. You're stuck with the situation until circumstances change. I couldn't doublecross Marriner even though I knew the old government would lose. But he's dead now and the Union is in power. I can make new loyalties."

"Personal or political?" Varden asked.

"Both," Ballerd said flatly.

"Marriner and I were friends in the early days," Varden said musingly. "Like myself, he had the capacity for inspiring loyalty. It was too bad he was so pigheaded about the Union. But enough of this. I asked you here for a purpose and we are wasting time. I've checked on you. You wouldn't be here if the results weren't favorable. You know that."

Ballerd nodded.

"I'm offering you a job," Varden said. "No—not *a* job," he corrected himself. "*The* job—Annalee Kane's job. Would you like to head Manpower Procurement and Allocation? Would you be willing to take the job of the woman you condemned?"

"Why not." Ballerd's face was impassive.

Varden touched a button on his desk, and two Security agents came into the room.

Ballerd recognized them from their attitude—a couple of Suzuke's specials. Trained to the hilt—emotionless as machines. Without batting an eye, they would kill him where he stood if Varden gave the word. The pair eyed him with a remote professional look.

"Take this man down to Interrogation for a Class One checkup," Varden said. He looked at Ballerd. "If you survive, you've passed the first hurdle. Otherwise . . ." he let the sentence dangle suggestively.

"I understood the conditions before I accepted the offer," Ballerd said woodenly.

"I know that," Varden said. "Frankly, Ballerd, I don't know whether I shall be glad or sorry if I see you in this office tomorrow, but good luck."

Ballerd grinned at him. "You'll see me all right, sir," he prophesied.

The basic trouble with the Union, Ballerd reflected, was that its officials believed their techniques were infallible. In a first class civilization this could be dangerous. In a second class one it could be fatal. And Vishnu wasn't first class. It never had been. Their technology was good, nearly the equal of worlds like Fanar and

Terranova, but vastly inferior to that of Lyrane or Terra. And Union knowledge of biology and psychodynamics was positively primitive. And their police work was crude even when compared with Marriner's old division. They did not know the rudiments of turning a man inside out mentally. Nor did they have the slightest knowledge of dampers. Ballerd grinned thinly. How could they—the gadget was organic and structurally indistinguishable from normal brain tissue. He shrugged. What Varden didn't know wouldn't hurt him—yet. His profile was clean, and agreed with what he had told Varden. He was ambitious and intelligent, but essentially a subordinate personality. And his checkup was generally clean. He was tailored to Varden's specifications — and designed for the dictator's destruction. Marriner would be avenged even though he had never known him.

On the following morning, true to his promise, Ballerd looked at Varden across the polished desk.

Varden smiled, a humorless grimace neither friendly nor unfriendly. "Well, Ballerd, you appear to be in remarkably good shape. Clear conscience, eh?"

"Politically at any rate," Ballerd admitted.

"That's the only way to be. Now I suppose you're interested in my decision."

Ballerd nodded. "I'm anticipating it," he said bluntly. "When do I start?"

Varden smiled. "Confident, aren't you?" he asked. "But you're right. I can use you. A man of your talents is wasted as a Juror. Your headquarters are three floors down. You can take over at once." Varden stared at him somberly. "A word of advice. Don't axe too many. Good people are hard to replace."

"I won't, sir. I don't work that way."

"That's good." Varden smiled drily. "My principal worry was that you might be that ancient virtuous cliché—a new broom."

It didn't take Ballerd long to realize that Annalee Kane had built a good organization. Surprisingly good, considering what had been said about her at the trial. And, incidentally, the shadow of that trial and his part in it hung over Manpower like a pall, but that could be straightened out. What couldn't be straightened out was that Annalee had run major policy on a personal basis. If there were any pri-

vate files, he couldn't locate them. What he needed was Annalee's memory, and that he wasn't going to get. Erasure wiped out the consciousness. He frowned. But what about the subconscious—the buried memories—the hidden drives. He pulled thoughtfully at an earlobe as he considered the possibilities. Then he called Vishnu Research Center. After that he phoned Varden.

The Coordinator's hurried voice snapped at him. "I'm busy. Call back later."

"Sorry, sir, this is important."

"Very well, I'll give you three minutes."

"That will be more than enough," Ballerd said. "I want to requisition Annalee Kane."

"You *What?*"

Ballerd repeated and listened as the phone made noises in his ear. "Yes, sir," he said. "I know what I'm doing. . . . No, sir, I want her I want her memories. She ran this office out of her head. . . . No—I'm not sure if they're available. Research Center doesn't think so. But I'd like to try. If they weren't cooked out entirely, hypno may bring them out. . . . Sure, I know erasure leaves a blank mind—but that could be surface memories. No one's ever really checked and if she's still useful, I'd like to use

her. . . . No, sir—I've no intention of putting her on the staff. I'm merely interested in what can be wrung out of her. I'd like any help I can get until I get this section straightened out. You can have her back once I'm through. . . . No, I suppose not; she isn't worth too much anyway." Ballerd echoed the chuckle that erupted from the receiver. "But I'd like your approval before I go on with this . . ." Ballerd continued, ". . . You do? . . . You will? . . . Fine. That will be excellent and thank you, sir." Ballerd looked at his watch. Two minutes forty-three seconds—and he had what he wanted. He grinned. Sometimes the direct approach was ten times as effective as pussy-footing.

He picked up the phone again and called Security personnel section, starting the machinery that would get him what he wanted. The thought of the discomfort he was about to cause Annalee never entered his head. She had information he needed, and he was going to get it if it was humanly possible. That was all.

Mental erasure was just what the name implied. The brain of the victim was unimpaired, but it was supposedly wiped clean. The first dose

eliminated the more recent memories, roughly about twenty years of them. Speech and most of the conditioned reflexes were seldom affected, which made minimal erasure hardly worse than a case of amnesia once the primary shock passed. The only difference was that memory in an erased person had never been restored. Successive treatments, however, reduced the victim to a mindless lump of flesh that maintained only the minimal reflexes necessary for life. The limit was three. Beyond that the victim died. Ballerd hoped that Security, which was responsible for administering judgment, hadn't gotten enthusiastic and decided that if one dose was adjudged, three would be better. There would be no chance if she had received more than a single dose.

It didn't take too long to find Annalee's location. She had been sent to Rehabilitation Camp Number Twelve. Ballerd sighed. Numbers One through Ten were for the two and three dose treatments, the insane, the degenerates, the psychopaths, and a few whom the Central Committee figured were too dangerous to retain any segment of their personality, yet were too valuable to execute. Marriner was there—

being reeducated into a conforming Unionist, as were most of the other bigwigs of the Old Government who had escaped the wave of executions that followed the Union's success. Ballerd shrugged. There was nothing he wanted from those. His business was with Annalee.

Camp Twelve was a pleasant enough place, located close to the equator. Except for the electronic fence and force dome surrounding the cluster of buildings, it looked like the military post it had once been. Ballerd's helicopter came down on the stage on top of the administration building and the force field formed above it with a sharp, crackling noise as the technicians who had lowered it in response to the IFF signal from the 'copter restored the cover that could keep out virtually anything except fourth order radiation. Small particles and air could seep through the complex lattice-work of electromagnetic force; but any substance larger than a grain of sand was violently repelled, or caught between different forces in the lattice and literally torn apart.

A pair of Security troopers saluted as he descended from the craft, and escorted him to

the Camp Superintendent's office.

"Glad to meet you, Brother Ballerd," the Superintendent said. "I'm Miles Graham, in charge of this station."

Ballerd smiled and shook Graham's outstretched hand.

"And what can I do for you, Brother Ballerd?" Graham said.

"You have an inmate here, a woman called Annalee Kane. I want her."

"You have the authority, I suppose. You know, of course, that I cannot release an inmate without Security approval—not even to a member of the Central Committee."

"Will this do?" Ballerd said, producing Varden's authorization.

Graham's eyes widened. His narrow face tightened as he looked at Ballerd. "Naturally," he said, "but we'll have to check."

"Absolutely. You would be negligent if you did not."

Graham relaxed. He touched a button on his desk and handed the authorization to a secretary who soft-footed into the room. "Check this," he said, and turned back to Ballerd. "I'll have to have more than the inmate's old name if you wish to find her. There are nearly three hundred

women in this camp, and we have no idea what their names were before they came here. Fact is, if it weren't for their ID numbers we wouldn't be able to tell one from another. You see, when we get them they have already gone through basic processing."

"What is that?"

Graham grinned. "You've never seen an inmate, have you?"

"No."

"Well, after judgment they are sent to one of the Research Medical Centers. Here they are processed for our camps while they're still in primary shock. They get a new face, and are plastiformed into one of ten basic types."

"Eh?"

"It's a new process. Essentially it is simple. By changing the shape of the bone structure by electrophoretic translocation of calcium and protein, and altering the location of subcutaneous fat deposits, an individual can be literally remade. They call it plastiforming. The process is still experimental and there is an occasional failure. But on the whole it works very well. However, the plastiform matrices are complicated and the changes cannot be too great, and so there are ten basic types of male and female bod-

ies which conform to the population mean." Graham grinned. "We can't do anything with six footers or midgets but, as for the rest—well—maybe I should show you."

He touched a stud on his desk and a wall screen filling one side of the room flickered into life. It showed the face of a building which flicked off and was replaced by a downward angle view of a grassy yard. About a hundred inmates were performing a rhythmic series of calisthenics under the watchful eyes of a dozen female guards dressed in short blue smocks. The guards kept them well in line.

Ballerd gasped! Not because the inmates were naked, for nudity was common enough on Vishnu's beaches, but because everyone was precisely the same as the next. The scanner picture swept down on the group as Graham spoke into a microphone. "Suspend exercise", he said. "Prepare for inspection." He opened the microphone switch and smiled at Ballerd. "We do this occasionally just to let them know we're checking on them. The guards, you see, are merely inmates whose profiles show capacity for leadership. If we didn't show them our

fist occasionally they might get ideas."

Ballerd kept looking at the screen. The two lines of naked bodies were drawn to rigid attention, and in front of them the ten guards stood in a rigid line. The scanner swept down and the picture moved slowly down the line past rigid body after identical body, face after identical face under its neat crown of hair drawn smoothly back to a knot at the back of the head. Outside of slight variations in the color of the eyes, and the color and length of their hair, the women were identical—except for a small blue number tattooed on their left hip.

The guards, equally motionless, stood with their hands grasping the hems of their uniform which they drew upward and forward to expose hip and thigh and show their tattooed numbers.

"Inspection completed," Graham said into the microphone. "Resume." He watched as the double line and the blue smocked guards again swung into motion. Then he turned off the screen.

"Good heavens!" the exclamation jumped involuntarily from Ballerd's lips. "No wonder you need more than a name!"

"They're all Type Two here—height five feet eight inches, asthenic. You see they are graded and encamped by physical type. Keeps things uniform and simplifies physical facilities and supply."

"Efficient," Ballerd said, "but which one is Annalee?"

The secretary reappeared, and Ballerd noted without surprise that she was another inmate. "The authorization is genuine, sir," she said.

"Fine," said Graham. "Now to find your party. Do you have any more data?"

"A Security dossier and fingerprint facsimiles," Ballerd said. "Are those enough?"

"Plenty—the fingerprints are not changed. Give me the card."

Ballerd passed it over and Graham handed it to the secretary. "Have this inmate report to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll find that she has no true memory of any events of the past after her tenth or twelfth year," he said. "Otherwise she's normal. Of course, she has memories filling in the gap, but they're synthetic—given at the Research Center. You'll find that she remembers living through the crash of '98 and being sold to a labor contractor by her starving parents and was worked as a

field hand until she nearly died, and was rescued from incineration by the Revolutionaries. This, and a long time in the hospital before she came here, is part of her memory rehabilitation. She may or may not be grateful, but she will be obedient. That I'll guarantee. The mental set she has acquired makes that much mandatory. I can't speak for her education up to the last true year she remembers, but from there on until she arrived here it is nil."

"Hmm. Not bad. You reeducate them and they're turned back into society. But how do you explain their identical appearance?"

"That was done by the labor contractors — the beasts!" Graham said with a grin. "We try to teach them to forget it, and distribute them widely enough after retraining to keep them pretty well apart. It works. The girls don't like this uniformity and tend to keep away from each other."

Ballard chuckled. "Like wearing the same hat?"

"Exactly."

"You lads don't miss a bet, do you?"

"Frankly, sir, we can't afford to. With manpower on our necks and a whole new order to create, we simply can't waste a thing. I hope you

have good use for this inmate."

"Don't worry. If I can't get what I want from her, I'll give her back to you. If I can, it'll be good use."

The secretary came back followed by a guard and an inmate, and laid two cards on Graham's desk.

"Number 14027 reporting as ordered," the guard said.

"You may return to your unit," Graham answered.

"Thank you, sir. Glory to the Union."

"Glory to the Union," Graham replied.

"Your name is?" Ballard asked the woman.

"I'm sorry, sir, it is not allowed." She looked at him and a slow wave of color swept across her face and neck. The nipples of her breasts tightened and a delicate muscle tremor swept across her stomach and thighs.

"But it is now," Graham said, and to Ballard, "Don't worry, sir. This is a normal reaction. Plastiforming apparently has some other effects besides altering shape. That's why we have separate camps for the sexes.

"Annalee—Annalee Kane—I think," she said slowly. It's been twenty years since I used that name—before they

brought me and gave me this number and put me to work picking taref buds. But I think it's Annalee—I'm sure it is." Her body quivered and her breath came faster.

"Her prints check," Graham said, looking up from the cards.

"That's enough," said Ballerd. "Get her some clothes, and I'll be off. And thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it," Graham said easily. "Anything for Brother Varden."

"I'll mention it when I see him," Ballerd said.

"Am I to go with you, sir?" Annalee asked.

"Yes," Ballerd said. "I'm taking charge of you."

"That will be nice," she murmured and then pressed her lips tightly together. An expression of blended eagerness and revulsion crossed her face.

What had happened to Annalee was all to the good physically. They had cut an inch off her height, and her new face was far more attractive than the old. The leanness of her body was replaced with adequate, almost opulent, curves that were visible even through the shapeless smock covering her body. All in all she was considerably more attractive

as a woman. A neat dish. But that wasn't her sole interest to Ballerd. It would remain after he had explored behind the facade, but right now he was more interested in what she knew rather than how she felt.

She sat quietly beside him as they sped back toward Varden City, her eyes flat and introspective. Suddenly she spoke. "Thanks for lifting me out of that hole, Ernst, I probably could have done the stretch all right. Might have made head guard in a few months, but I never could have gotten out soon enough. I would have gone crazy in there. This body they gave me has something wrong with its glands. I keep thinking about men. Perhaps it is because I wasn't erased like the others. But some of the others had it almost as bad as I.

Ballerd froze.

"Oh don't get so excited, Ernst. I recognized you almost immediately. Tissuemold can change you even better than plastiform. It can give you an artificial limp. But it can't change the color of your eyes or hide an iris mark. You have two little brown flecks like tiny leaves on your right iris. I noted them in school in our tactics short course, and when I found out I couldn't handle

this fire I sent for you. I'd know you anywhere."

Ballerd felt numbness creep up his legs. "All right, so you're a fireman—I hope. But you'd have to be or that brain-burn would have wiped you clean, superficially at least. You have a damper. And so far that's exclusive Bureau property."

She nodded. "You would have known eventually," she said, "but your conditioning and the circumstances made it sooner rather than later. You *had* to protect me, you know. And you *had* to jerk me out if you could. I assumed, of course, that you'd pick a prototype who could be of help. But I was really surprised when I found you among the Jurors.

"But why—?"

"I was no real use. Although my prototype was a strong Unionist, Varden has no faith in women. He'd have sacked me sooner or later. I couldn't reach him. So you had to take my place. That's why I let myself get rapped on that malfeasance charge. Didn't you think it was pretty obvious?"

"Yes, in a sense, but I thought you were a stupid amateur who got caught. You camouflaged perfectly."

Annalee nodded, smiling.

"But how did you know I'd

only order erasure—and for that matter, how did you know I'd be a Juror?"

"The first part of that question is easy. It was the only logical solution. You were conditioned against doing me harm and you knew, subconsciously, I had a damper. As for the second, you were on the jury list and it was the logical way to draw Varden's attention. If you hadn't managed to make the grade, I would have defended myself, and I had a perfectly good defense. In fact, it was good enough to put Suzuke in a pickle. But you would have been replaced. If you couldn't have taken advantage of the opportunity, you wouldn't have been right for this job. By the same token I couldn't help you. You had to handle this alone. Varden would have no confidence in a man who had to lean on someone else to get the job done. You had to get his confidence. Incidentally, you haven't done so well there. By now you should be working out of manpower. What's the matter?"

"What did you do with your files?"

"You mean to tell me you couldn't figure out a blind filing system? Skip every three-files, inserts, sentences, words.

They're numbered serially by accessions. Good heaven's, man, that's the simplest method in the Galaxy!"

"I didn't expect it," Ballerd muttered. "And, besides, Varden's pushing. He's got some fat scheme up his sleeve to get more manpower. That's one commodity in short supply here."

She nodded. "It has been in short supply for me, too. Especially recently," she said.

"Get your mind down to earth," Ballerd said. "You've made it easier than I expected, but you've left me a problem. What am I to do with you? I was planning to psych you, but that's unnecessary now."

"I have a suggestion about what you can do," Annalee said. "You go ahead as you've planned. I won't crack. And when you've finally established to their satisfaction that I know nothing, perhaps you can find a place for me."

Ballerd chuckled. "That's a good idea. If it works we can work together on this case. You'll apparently be a mess when I'm through with you and no sort of material for rehabilitation. I'm sure I can keep you on my personal staff as a housekeeper or something like that. I think Varden'll be agreeable if it comes to a question." He grinned and then

broke off abruptly as his wristwatch buzzed and the stressed crystal of the dial turned a faint yellow. Someone below had turned a scanner on them. Ballerd silently thanked the forethought of the Bureau which had provided this detector as part of his equipment.

Annalee's face which had begun to glow suddenly turned wooden. Ballerd's became flinty and impassive, as they sat quietly. They could do nothing else. Not with a probe on them. Security was investigating incoming aircraft for some reason known only to Varden and Suzuke.

Presently the buzzing stopped. "No more talk", Ballerd said. "Play it straight from now on."

She nodded imperceptibly.

His wristwatch buzzed again as he dropped his hand on his wrist and pressed the cutoff stud.

Despite the fact that the Union controlled everything on Vishnu, getting adequate labor at the proper place at the proper time was a job that would tax the patience of a saint. There was perpetually too much to do, and too little with which to do it. Despite technology and automation the shortage of workers was acute. Colonial societies al-

ways lacked manpower. And since most human colonies were products of the Exodus there was a mental set against high population densities and expanding birthrates. The consequences were too familiar. Some of the older colonies weren't so badly crippled, but Vishnu was relatively young—less than three centuries old—and men were still alive who remembered the bad old days.

It was easier now that he had Annalee's files, but it was far from a simple job. And Varden was taking an inordinate interest in manpower. And Annalee was taking an inordinate interest in him. Not that he disliked it. But it did complicate things to have a fellow agent for a mistress. She knew the hazards of this business, and tried to protect him. She fussed over him, gave him unnecessary advice, and generally muddled his thinking while trying to protect him. It was a ghastly mixture of pleasure and discomfort that he disliked even as he enjoyed.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ballerd said to Varden for the hundredth time. "There simply aren't enough people available to do what you wish. I realize that the Yarvid Delta Project is necessary, but to make ten

thousand labor units available I'd have to rob the Navy. They simply don't exist in the civil population."

"You can't rob the Navy," Varden said flatly.

Ballerd shrugged. "I know," he said, "But what *can* I do? I can't take men from other departments and there's almost nothing left in the manpower pool. The rehabilitees are a drop in the bucket, the children are too young, and the students are necessary for the future. What's left?"

Varden shrugged his shoulders. "That's your problem," he said.

"No sir, it's yours."

"What?"

"As I've said, we have nothing available, but it can be obtained."

"How? Where?"

"On Krishna, or Thoth, the other two planets in this sector."

"Are you advocating conquest?"

"If necessary. But we could try to hire labor from them first."

"We've tried. No dice."

"We need manpower," Ballerd said. "Both of those worlds have good-sized populations, and both are inferior to us technically and economically."

Varden smiled. "Well, your

thought is not new. But the governments of Krishna and Thoth are singularly selfish. They won't let us have the men." Varden's smile became a grin. "So what do we do?"

"So they want to keep what they can't use—so we take it."

"You forget the Confederation. They're members."

Ballerd sneered. "Show that debating society an established fact and they'll have to like it."

"Not necessarily. They never have—and we're not going to provoke them. I don't think they'll touch us as long as we stay in our own back yard—but if we move out they might."

"Ha!" Ballerd snorted. "Not likely. We're out on the galactic edge. No fleet could bother us at this range. They'd be too far from their bases."

"You should study the Firemen," Varden said.

Ballerd smiled to himself. *He* should study the Firemen! He'd been working as one for more years than Varden had been alive! The Bureau—insiders called it the Fire Department and its agents Firemen—The Bureau of Interworld Relations of the Galactic Confederation was an outgrowth of the old inspection system that kept peace on

earth in the early days of the Atomic Revolution before mankind reached interstellar space. In its thousand years of existence the Bureau had refined its technics to inspect worlds and systems which didn't want to be inspected, to squelch brush-fire wars, to cool off hot spots before they erupted and engulfed a whole sector of civilization in blazing ruin.

In a civilization where technology was still eons ahead of social development, the Fire Department was an absolute necessity. It was the governor, the balance wheel that kept the whole creaky machinery of the Confederation from flying apart from internal pressures.

If the Fire Department could be said to believe in anything, it believed that there was no such thing as a government beneficial to all its citizens. Therefore, it worked toward the interim improvement and ultimate abolition of all government. It wasn't going to attain its aim of enlightened anarchy in the foreseeable future, people being what they were, but the goal was there and someday it might be reached providing the Confederation was kept at peace long enough for a true social science to develop. Its

methods were legion; from persuasion to assassination, from conversion to coercion, from reason to emotion, from honor to treachery. The goal was what mattered. The means, it was long ago decided, were unimportant. Firemen were the most skillful agent provocateurs, the most convincing messiahs, the most tender empathists, and the most brutal sadists in all the galaxy. They were admired, hated, feared, loved and respected. They were everywhere, yet seldom seen and seldom known. They were the conscience, the lash, the personification of authority that even the most absolute ruler or government eyed with fear and respect. They were dedicated to peace and would preserve it if they had to slaughter every war monger in the galaxy.

"I've been expecting them to interfere ever since we took over," Varden continued. "I thought for awhile that Anna-lee was one of their agents but there's no evidence of that. They made no move to interfere, but they're probably here all right. Still, they haven't done anything yet—nor will they unless they get an opportunity. Our business is not to give them one. While

I agree with you in principle, your method is deadly. So we'll never make an overt move against Krishna or Thoth. They'll invite us in!"

"This I want to see," Ballerd said. "How do you plan to do it?"

Varden chuckled. "Simple. Take Krishna for example. We infiltrate using native Krishnans. The situation there is essentially the same as it was here—a ruling group of city-states and a restless peasantry. An essentially agricultural community eager for change, held back by a small but well-armed police and army. With care, we should be able to get weapons and a *limited quantity of ammunition* into the hands of the revolt. Now do you get the picture?"

Ballerd smiled. "Yes, sir. It's obvious. After the peasants revolt, we step in to maintain order."

"On the invitation of the ruling class," Varden added.

"They'll invite us?"

"Of course. Officially, we're friendly. In fact we're the only friends they have. They've been ripe for the Firemen for nearly a generation, and they know it. But they've kept their noses clean. They'll turn to us before they'll ever turn to Earth Central."

"Then we liquidate the rulers?"

"Certainly not."

"The peasants?"

"We remove their leaders. And why not? Most of them will be our own people. After that we'll be in the saddle—and with their ruling class in our hands and properly conditioned, we'll take over in fact if not physically. Then we'll get our labor."

Ballerd nodded. "I get the idea. It's neat."

Varden chuckled. "It is indeed." He shrugged. "But modern conquest has to be neat. We can't afford to attract attention."

"And the Firemen will do nothing?"

"What can they do? They only have two choices. They can either help the Krishnan peasants or their rulers. Either way we'll win. You see, this is modern conquest. It isn't exactly war, yet it is war in its broadest sense. Literally anything can be a useful tool if it furthers our ends. Fighting is no part of the plan nor is direct interference. We simply can't resort to formal war to gain our ends because we'd have the whole Confederation on our necks if we did. So we must work more slowly and employ a continuing pressure that uses every trick of espion-

age, sabotage, propaganda, economics, sociology, psychology, and technology to achieve its ends. Until we are bigger than our opposition we can't come into the open."

"I see," Ballerd said slowly. He eyed Varden with respectful admiration. Alone, the man had developed a system that was the duplicate of the Department's thousand year evolution. Dedicated to a diametrically opposite goal the system would still work. Suddenly he realized that the *type* of goal was unimportant, and that the methods were, in the last analysis, the only thing that held any meaning. Varden was a genius. Evil, perhaps, but a genius nevertheless.

"But this isn't the thing you asked me up here for," he continued. "I've worked with you long enough to know that. You didn't summon me here merely to lecture on revolutionary strategy."

Varden laughed. "You're right, as usual. I want you to head up the Navy Department, to take Haring's place."

"Why?"

"Several reasons. You're a good organizer, a team player, and you're intelligent. You know how to improvise—and you have a capacity for inspiring loyalty in your staff. Har-

ing isn't nearly your caliber. He's tough but he's a proceduralist and lacks imagination. Frankly, I think the Admirals are running him. I need someone I can depend upon in case there's a showdown with Earth Central. I need the Fleet for a club. Sure—we couldn't possibly win a war with the Confederation but we could cause so much damage while losing that they'd think twice before attacking us. I can't depend on Haring to carry out my orders if it comes to that sort of a showdown but I think I can depend on you. I'm arranging a mutual transfer. You'll accept, of course."

"Of course."

"I was sure you would. After all, there's more power in the Navy than there is anywhere else except in my office. Now when can you start?"

"Tomorrow?"

Varden laughed. "Take your time," he said. "It'll be a few months before we're ready to move. Take a month. You and Haring can brief each other."

"Haring's not going to like this."

"He doesn't have to," Varden said flatly. "I give the orders."

The mechanics of authoritarian government are simple, Ballerd reflected. The leader

states his wishes to his staff, and they in turn transmit them to their staffs. The whole thing spreads outward like ripples from a stone dropped into a quiet pool. And finally, out on the fringes, the will of the ruler is carried out by men who know him only as a name.

The surprising thing, of course, is that people put up with it. It just went to show that society was no better than it had been in the Dark Ages. People were sheep and all the guidance in the universe wasn't going to make them goats. They *wanted* someone else to do their thinking for them. And if that thinking involved their suffering and dying, it was a small price to pay to avoid the horror and uncertainty of making their own decisions. He realized with a mild revulsion that the only way to stop a setup like this was at the center, by smashing the leader himself. There was no truth in that ancient belief that the system would carry on even if the leader was gone. In an absolute dictatorship the leader *was* the state. Without him it would die—or change so much that it could no longer act. No subordinate had the leader's capacity to rule. Had there been one, he would be

the leader or be ruthlessly eliminated. A leader doesn't—can't—tolerate competition. Ballerd smiled thinly. If there was a weakness in Varden's system, that was it.

But Varden wasn't a fool. He couldn't be destroyed easily and with modern gerontological techniques, there wasn't much chance of his dying a natural death in the near future. Ballerd grimaced. Destroy him. That was easy to say. But there'd be plenty of work before the first shot could be fired. It would have to succeed the first time. There would be no second chance. The only mistake Varden had made was to assume that the firemen were honorable, that they wouldn't move unless given cause.

He took a government cab from the carpool and went home. For the moment he had taken all he could endure. He needed the comfort Annalee could offer. He checked in with the defense mechs, landed, opened the door of the cab and stepped down on the familiar roof of his fortress-like house between a cluster of quick firing missile launches. With a silent rush, the cab leaped skyward under its automatic controls and disappeared back in the direction of Union Headquarters. He

watched it go as the launchers automatically tracked it, eyes squinted at the unrestful glare of Vishnu's cloudless yellow sky—and then slowly walked toward the manlift that would take him down to the living area below, automatically giving the proper responses that allowed him to pass through the defenses and alarms.

Everything was abnormal, he thought bitterly. Even the air of his house was strange. There was a faint sharp antiseptic bite to it that tickled his nostrils and made him want to sneeze. For a moment he didn't recognize the odor—then memory came with a rush—*ozone!* The whole place reeked of it!

He followed his nose. It led him through the house to the short corridor that ended at Annalee's room. The hallway smelled like an electroweld plant. Quietly he opened the door.

She was sitting in front of a haywire arrangement of tubes, coils and condensers that pulsed with an eerie bluish glow as the big bronze megatron tube poured ozone into the room from its coruscating surface.

He grimaced, remembering a humorously accurate remark

that the only way one could trace a nondirectional communicator was to smell it out. But what was *Annalee* doing with a thing like this?

She was talking to someone parsecs away, huddled over the microphone, her hand on the scrambler control that varied the frequency to a prearranged pattern—"and to my knowledge the situation is deteriorating badly. It isn't critical yet—but you'd better make other plans and *soon*. I don't think he's capable of handling it. Just a matter of the wrong man in the right place. I would estimate another month before Varden is ready to move. The preliminary steps should be completed by that time . . . No—he's still running Manpower, and as you know that position is not the critical one we need to fill . . . No, I still am certain we did the right thing. The only trouble is that Varden is as suspicious as a wild animal . . . Personally, I think I should level with Ballerd but if you insist I'll hold off. This is a good O.P. and perhaps you're right . . . Roger. Two Sixty Three out."

"Very interesting," Ballerd said.

With a gasp she turned to face him.

"At the risk of sounding

trite," Ballerd said slowly, "how long has this been going on?"

"From the time you brought me here. I just couldn't see you taking such chances. So I've been trying to get you replaced. I don't want a corpse."

"You utter blithering fool," Ballerd said venomously. "Do you know what you've done?"

She shook her head.

"You've alerted Varden! Sure, I know they can't trace this rig but they can tap it. And even though Security can't crack our scrambler, they know it's us by the mere fact that they can't crack it. And given time they'll unscramble some of the stuff. They've got it all on tape and judging from what you've been saying they'll have enough to put the finger on both of us—and whatever we've done will go down the drain! Varden *knows* that we're here, and it's only a question of time before he finds out. He's not stupid. He's a genius. He's duplicated our setup. Now clean that mess up—dispose of it, and *don't ever* try to broadcast again. Trust a woman to louse things up. Just when I've conned Varden into giving me the Navy!"

"He what?"

"You heard me. I've been offered the Navy—N-A-V-Y—get it?"

"When?"

"This morning."

"When do you take over?"

"No comment."

"Why not?"

"No trust."

"But how can I help if I don't know what's going on?" Annalee wailed.

"You can't but you can't hinder either. Now be a good girl and keep out of my way, or I'll beat you like a drum."

"Men," she snorted. "That's all they can think of. Shoot them. Kill them. Beat them up. All of you think with your biceps rather than your brain!"

"You should talk. But I suppose you're right. Still, I wonder what part of *your* anatomy takes over when your brain quits." He looked at her meaningly and she blushed.

"I can't help what they did when they remodelled me," she said. "I had a normal set of emotions once."

"Well, just sit on them and stop thinking with them."

"You're insufferably nasty," she said.

Ballerd grinned. She was on the defensive now. Women might be Firemen but they'd never stop being subjective. It

was about ready to come now, the barrage of recrimination and justification.

"And after all I did for you—" Annalee began.

Ballerd sighed and stopped listening. It would be over after awhile and then they could start planning. He'd tell her his plans, of course. She had a good head and a quick eye for detail. If only she were not a woman—and if only she were not—he shook his head. He didn't mean that last, not any part of it.

"One thing's certain," Annalee said. "No matter how we work it it's going to be difficult. We'll need everything at hand, a split second timetable, and more luck than we deserve if we expect to get away with it. We can blank the scanners for about three minutes by shorting the line in your office."

"I know. But Varden's the key to everything. We have to take the chance. It's the only way."

"Yes—that's why I sent in his profile a year ago."

"I read it. It was good."

She smiled. "And those trid photos were honeys," she said. "I even had scale calibrations incorporated in the shots."

"You *what*?"

"Scale calibrations — you know, measurements!"

"Get on that communicator—*right now!*"

"But you said—"

"Forget it. You were smart to build it. Get your contact and have a tissuemold of Varden made as soon as possible. Make it crash priority. I want that duplicate here in a month. No longer. And make it clear to them that it's essential!"

"What are you thinking of?"

"It's just an idea now. We'll kick it around and polish it later." He grinned. "Did I ever tell you that sometimes you are a genius, *besides* being beautiful?" he asked.

"You had some other ideas a short while ago," she replied.

"Forget it. You've made up for everything. You're wonderful."

Annalee smiled as she closed the power switch on the communicator. He wasn't angry now, and later perhaps he'd prove it. She shook her head. Sometimes this new body interfered with rational thought, and it was questionable as to whether it or her mind was in control.

"Ballerd!" Varden's voice crackled over the intercom. "I want to see you at once!"

"Coming, sir," Ballerd said. He rose slowly—well—to use

a much-worn cliché—this was it. Either it worked or the fleet came in and blasted Vishnu out of the sky. The command decision had been reached a week ago. He had two more days until deadline—and a hundred million more or less innocent lives were hanging on his actions. The Confederation was alarmed and it reacted in the only way it knew—with overwhelming naked force. Orders were already issued and if Varden wasn't checked there would be war. Already the fleet units were assembling. It was a chancy business. The Vishnan fleet was good and its smallness was counterbalanced by its closeness to base. If the Confederation went through with this and success wasn't immediate, the Union could hold out indefinitely. The armed force of the Confederation would be chewed up in a grinding war of attrition. Defections would occur, and in the end the whole of Civilization would lose whether the Union was smashed or not. Social evolution would be set back several generations and much of the painfully built work of the Fire Department would be undone.

He walked across the room, pushed the button to summon the elevator that would take

him to Varden's quarters, and waited while the door slid open. The door to his inner office opened and a man came out followed by Annalee. She was acting as his secretary now—and perhaps giving Suzuki's surveillance boys something to grin about with some of her actions. But it was good camouflage. The two men entered the elevator. Nothing happened. "The scanners are off. Come on," Ballerd said. His fingers caressed the tiny needle gun in his pocket as he applied his ID plaque to Varden's private entrance. He shot down the two Security men inside the door before they realized he was armed, and opened the inner door to Varden's chambers.

Varden glared at him furiously. "Did you know this?" he asked accusingly, waving a paper in his hand. Ballerd didn't have to look at it. He'd made it up himself. It was the intelligence summary of Earth Central's recent actions.

"Of course. The fleet's been informed. I've already sent message torps, sir. It's too bad that they're on maneuvers and under communication silence—but they should get the message early tomorrow. But we didn't know. Central clamped on a security blackout and our

agents couldn't get messages out."

"Tomorrow!" Varden exploded. "This message says two days!"

"I know, sir—but that's the first sign we have had the Confederation was considering action against us. You could accede to their demands if you don't feel up to tackling the Grand Fleet.

"Do you think I'll *crawl* to them?" Varden roared.

"I suppose not, sir, but two days is a short time. We're going to be at a disadvantage."

"I know," Varden said. "But if we get the ships here in time—"

"It'll still be messy."

"Well, then—what do you suggest?"

"I'd suggest that you resign. That'd satisfy the Confederation. You could always resume control later."

"It's no good. With this bunch of power-grabbers at the top I'd never make it. Besides the Confederation wants my scalp!" Varden looked unhappy. "What did I do to provoke them to action like this?"

"The Krishnan government protested?"

"No—it's something else. That takeover went strictly according to plan. I'd bet it was the Firemen. This smells

like their work. But why? We were careful not to provoke anyone."

"Probably they thought that if you succeeded with Krishna, you could succeed again," Ballerd said, "and every other would-be emperor in the Confederation would try to follow your footsteps. You're just the horrible example. You can't be allowed to succeed. The Union is no worse than many other tyrannies except for one thing. It's successful! And that success is due to you. You are the Union. Without you its ambitions would be limited and in time it would degenerate into just another oligarchy—too obsessed with its petty internal affairs to become troublesome. But with you at its head, the Union is a four alarm fire that can wreck the Confederation. If you had been content with this world, then we would have been content with you, but your profile is a conqueror's. And of course we can't allow conquest to succeed. It disrupts the peace."

Comprehension and fury chased each other across Varden's face. "We?" he exploded. "Us?—You dirty spy!"

Ballerd shook his head. "Fireman," he corrected.

Varden's hand slapped his desk.

Ballerd watched—motionless. Nothing happened.

Varden reached for his jacket.

"Hold it!" Ballerd's voice was sharp. The gun was in his hand.

Varden looked with blank-faced surprise. "But—you've been searched. His expression turned to one of horror as he looked past Ballerd at the hall.

There was a half sad, half cruel smile on Ballerd's face. "You have a lot to learn but you're getting the idea," he said as he squeezed the trigger.

The expression of surprise was still on Varden's face as he fell.

Ballerd spun around to face the open door. A duplicate Varden was standing there, gun in hand, indecision on his face. "Dammit, man," Ballerd gritted, "you know what to do! Get it over!"

Flame blossomed in the synthetic Varden's hand. A crushing blow hit Ballerd in the chest. And everything went dark . . .

It was like floating upward out of a pit of ink. Slowly there was movement, light, sound—and pain. But the pain wasn't unbearable.

"Thank God," someone said.

"I was afraid that it was too low. He'll live but it was close—damned close!"

Someone was crying. He opened his eyes. Annalee was bending over him and the expression on her face was radiant.

"Well—" he asked, "did it work?"

"Perfectly. You looked convincingly dead, and Varden—our Varden—liquidated Suzuke before he could investigate. Accused him of criminal carelessness in letting the automatics fail, and letting an assassin like you get that close to him. But he's having a hard time keeping things under control. He isn't the leader type. He'll have to be replaced. He was the best we had at the time."

"Did you get Varden out?"

She nodded. "It worked just like you figured. With you supposedly dead and Suzuke liquidated, the Committee went into a king-sized flip. He went out with the bodies and nobody thought a thing about it until it was too late, and what with our boy threatening hellfire and damnation, everyone was too glad to save his skin without worrying too much about an extra body. But they'll start thinking pretty soon unless someone gets out there who can

run things. Our lad can't."

"Who's been picked?"

"Guess— Just why do you think we were so eager for you to survive?"

"Not me. I want no part of it!"

"You have no choice. It's tissuemold for you tomorrow, my lad, then off to Vishnu. We've got a slick transfer scheme all worked out. And, incidentally, you've added a new tactic. The chief's all worked up about it. Don't assassinate, replace, and you're the guinea pig. Better do a good job."

Ballerd shrugged. Tissue-mold had restored his smashed shoulder. He was as good as new. "Take care of Varden," he said.

"Don't worry," said Annalee, "he's getting a complete reorientation. When they're through with him, he'll be a better fireman than either of us. That was another idea that clicked. Someday you're going to be sitting behind a big desk here at Earth Central giving orders. You have the executive mentality, and running Vishnu should help develop it."

"God forbid, but if so, I shall need a secretary."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Annalee asked.

**THE END**

**FANTASTIC**

**Editor's Note:** With this critical evaluation of one of the great architects of science-fiction and the accult tale, **FANTASTIC** begins a series of articles by Sam Moskowitz, the quasi-official historian of the genre. In future issues, Mr. Moskowitz will analyze the ideas, skills and contributions of such outstanding men as Stapledon, Capek, Gernsback, M. P. Shiel, H. F. Heard, and Philip Wylie (whose exploits as a science-fictioneer are overshadowed by his exploits as a professional nose thumper). It is our hope that this series will stir discussion among veteran readers, and give some historical perspective to younger science-fiction devotees.

# **A STUDY IN HORROR**

## **The Eerie Life of . . .**

# **H. P. LOVECRAFT**

By **SAM MOSKOWITZ**

**T**HE present commentator does not believe that the idea of space-travel and other worlds is inherently unsuited to literary use. It is rather, his opinion that the omnipres-

ent cheapening and misuse of that idea is the result of a wide-spread misconception; a misconception which extends to other departments of weird and science fiction as well. This fallacy is the notion that any account of impossible, improbable or inconceivable phenomena can be successfully presented as a commonplace narrative of objective acts and conventional emotions in the ordinary tone and manner of populace romance," H. P. Lovecraft wrote in his essay *Some Notes On Interplanetary Fiction* which appeared in the Winter, 1935 number of the amateur magazine THE CALIFORNIAN.

The erroneous notion has long been prevalent that H. P. Lovecraft belongs primarily to the field of the weird and supernatural. The truth is that his contribution to science fiction has not only been substantial, it has been *pivotal* in its considerable influence.

A literary pied piper, H. P. Lovecraft established himself as an outstanding master of weird fiction and then as an admired and widely imitated figure, led some of the brightest young stars of the macabre into the field of science fiction.

The result was twofold.

First, Lovecraft and his acolytes popularized the elements of horror and supernatural-like mystery in science fiction. Secondly, since the creation of successful tales of horror depends upon the careful building of a special effect, they placed emphasis upon the development of a *mood* rather than dependence upon romantic adventure or a unique plot twist.

Certainly, Lovecraft was not the first to inject such components into science fiction. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* is nothing if it is not scientifically-based horror and few if any "mood" science fiction tales surpass in excellence Edgar Allan Poe's *Ms. Found in a Bottle*. In more recent times, William Hope Hodgson has masterfully combined both elements in *The Night Land* and *Voice in the Night*. However, these aspects had been largely ignored as first the scientific romance and then the heavy science tale took turns at popularity. Lovecraft restored horror to magazine science fiction.

Considering Lovecraft's early interests, it is strange that he ever took his gloomy tack in fiction at all. Born August 20, 1890, the major

parental influence was his mother, since his father, Winfield Lovecraft, made his living as a travelling salesman. The father was confined to a mental institution for the last five years of his life and died in 1898 of paresis. Young Howard Lovecraft, though a sickly child, was a bright one. He was able to read at the age of four and his grandfather encouraged him to make extensive use of the large library in his Benefit Street residence.

According to Lovecraft's own notes, he became seriously interested in the sciences at the age of eight and enjoyed his own small chemical laboratory. "Finally astronomy dawned on me," he said, "and the lure of other worlds and inconceivable cosmic gulfs eclipsed all other interests for a long period after my twelfth birthday."

He published a small hektographed paper called *THE RHODE ISLAND JOURNAL OF ASTRONOMY* and later wrote newspaper columns on astronomy for *THE PROVIDENCE EVENING JOURNAL*, and *The Asheville, N. C. GAZETTE-NEWS*.

This strong, active and almost professional interest in the physical sciences of chemistry and astronomy, while un-

usual in one so young, bore no direct relation to the outre inclination his early fiction was to take. Neither did his somewhat later preference in reading matter, for the authors he championed in his early twenties stressed the romantic, scientific or more positive aspects of science fiction.

A letter published in the March 7, 1914 issue of that early stronghold of the scientific romance *THE ALL-STORY MAGAZINE*, sheds a revealing light on his preferences at the time. "In the present age of vulgar taste and sordid realism it is a relief to peruse a publication such as *THE ALL-STORY*, which has ever been and still remains under the influence of the imaginative school of Poe and Verne. At the head of your list of writers Edgar Rice Burroughs undoubtedly stands. I have read very few recent novels by others wherein is displayed an equal ingenuity in plot, and verisimilitude in treatment. His only fault seems to be a tendency toward scientific inaccuracy and slight inconsistencies. I hardly need mention the author of *A COLUMBUS OF SPACE* further than to say I have read every published work of Garrett P. Serviss, own most of them.

and await his future writings with eagerness."

When THE ALL-STORY MAGAZINE combined with another great adventure periodical which featured science fiction, H. P. Lovecraft wrote again enthusiastically: "The greatest benefit derived from the amalgamation undoubtedly will be the return to THE ALL-STORY of George Allan England, who, to my mind, ranks with Edgar Rice Burroughs and Albert Payson Terhune as one of the three supreme literary artists of the house of Munsey. Mr. England's *Darkness and Dawn* trilogy is on a par with the *Tarzan* stories, and fortunate indeed is that magazine which can secure as contributors the authors of both."

That letter appeared in the readers' columns of the August 15, 1914 issue of ALL-STORY CAVALIER when Lovecraft was twenty-four years of age. For a man of his proven precociousness these preferences cannot be dismissed as juvenile fancies.

Lovecraft did a variety of writing for the two leading amateur press publications of the time—the UNITED AMATEUR and THE NATIONAL AMATEUR—but the earliest work of his that can be considered of professional calibre was

written in 1917. There is evidence here that Lovecraft was ready at that early date to follow a natural inclination into science fiction, if we properly evaluate his short story *Dagon*, which did not see publication until the November 1919 issue of THE VAGRANT.

This story is beyond question a work of science fiction. A packet is sunk by a German submarine during the first World War and one of its crew is set adrift in a lifeboat. His craft becomes mired in the mud of a new island which rises mysteriously from the floor of the sea. On this island he discovers an ancient monolith upon which is chiseled the forms of gigantic, froglike men, engaged in various marine endeavors. When a tremendous man-like scaled thing rises above the waters, a nearly insane fear inspires the castaway with the strength to launch his craft and escape from the island. The story ends as the protagonist realizes that the monstrous creature who resembles the fish god Dagon, of the ancient Philistines, has searched him out in San Francisco.

Lovecraft has claimed that he received inspiration for his Cthulhu mythos from his reading of Lord Dunsany in 1919.

Careful reading of *Dagon* strongly suggests that the famous mythology was already in formation and the only thing Dunsany taught Lovecraft was not to attach legendary names to his horrors but to invent new ones.

The literary love affair that transpired for several years after Lovecraft encountered Dunsany's work effectively side-tracked him from moving directly into science fiction. What entranced Lovecraft was the "crystalline singing prose of Lord Dunsany. Form eclipsed subject matter in his mind and led him to other stylists of the supernatural such as Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lafcadio Hearn, M. P. Shiel and other greats and near greats of the literature of darkness.

After Dunsany, Lovecraft took turns imitating the others but first impressions remained the strongest and the clear, harp-like chords of the Irish lord echoed periodically through Lovecraft's entire lifetime of writing. Most beautifully and true does it sound in *The Silver Key*, *The Strange High House in the Mist*, *The Quest of Iranon* and *Celephais*.

While Lovecraft was saturating himself with the essence of Dunsany, he did not

completely desert the writing of science fiction.

*Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, the title story of one of his collections, later published by Arkham House was written originally in 1919 and deals with an interne who electronically receives the mental impulses of an intelligence from a distant star system. The later flaring of a nova near Algol, the Demon Star, as predicted by the alien from far outer space, confirms the authenticity of the contact.

The following year Lovecraft wrote *From Beyond*, in which a machine utilizing the ultra-violet principle makes it possible to see creatures normally invisible to human sight with disastrous results.

Both of these stories, despite stretches of excellent writing, are minor excursions in the genre. But the same cannot be said of *The Temple*, written the same year and published in WEIRD TALES for September, 1925. This tale, in writing and plotting, is a science fiction masterpiece.

A German submarine in World War I is trapped on the ocean's floor and only one of its crewmen, a Prussian officer, remains alive. He discovers he is near the ruins of an undersea city which may be

the legendary Atlantis. Lovecraft brilliantly delineates the slow disintegration of the German's military reserve as his supplies of power, food and water slowly give out. The desperately trapped Prussian explores parts of the ruins in a diving suit. Finally, with lights burned out, and air almost exhausted, he leaves the submarine a final time to investigate what he thinks is a glowing radiance in a temple-like structure in the distance.

*The Temple* has not received the attention it deserves as one of Lovecraft's most successful and forthright presentations.

The first professional opportunity Lovecraft obtained was with an evanescent periodical of the early twenties titled HOME BREW. He wrote for the editor and publisher, George Houtain, a strange series of six short stories in 1921 and 1922, built around the scientific attempts of Herbert West, a brilliant young medical student, to bring the dead back to life. The intent was to horrify through utilization of the time-worn theme of restoring the dead, but the explanations for the experiments were not in any way supernatural, qualifying the series as true science fiction.

HOME BREW also bought a novelet entitled *The Lurking Fear*, which it ran as a four-part serial beginning in the January, 1923, number. This extremely rococo tale is built around the degenerate descendants of a once-proud family, who live in underground tunnels and venture forth every now and then to cannibalistically devour some hapless surfaceman. The story seems to have derived its essence from portions of H. G. Wells' *Time Machine*.

Previous to the publication of this story, Lovecraft's mother, Sarah Susan, had passed her last years in a Providence hospital, dying early in 1919. The knowledge that both of his parents had died from maladies that left them mentally disturbed at the end is advanced by David H. Keller, M.D., in his remarkable essay *Shadows Over Lovecraft*, as a possible reason for Lovecraft's preoccupation with a tragic hereditary morbidity in many of his stories.

*Dagon*, *Far Beyond* and *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* come well within the scope of present-day science fiction but, beginning with *Herbert West* and continuing with *The Lurking Fear*, we find the science attenuated almost to the diminishing point. The ex-

treme is reached in *The Unnamable*, published in WEIRD TALES for July, 1925. The theme of *The Unnamable*, clearly derived from Fitz-James O'Brien's *What Was It?* deals in graveyard investigations which end when a near-invisible monster streams from a pit, knocking everyone down, and disappearing into the night. The story is slight in plot and fails to communicate the desired mood.

The advent of WEIRD TALES magazine, particularly the elevation of Farnsworth Wright to the editorial seat, was the most important development in a literary sense, in Lovecraft's writing career. Since 1917 he had been writing and donating to amateur periodicals, a great many weird stories. Most of these now readily sold to WEIRD TALES.

Beginning with *Dagon*, which appeared in its October, 1923, issue, WEIRD TALES published in quick succession *The Picture in the House*, *The Hound*, *The Rats in the Walls*, *The White Ape*, *Hypnos*, *The Festival*, *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, *The Music of Erich Zann*, *The Unnamable*, *The Temple*, *The Tomb*, *The Cats of Ulthar*, *The Outsider*, *The Lurking Fear*, *The Moon-Bog*, *The Terrible Old*

*Man*, *He*, *The Horror at Red Hook* and *The White Ship*.

After the appearance of *The Rats in the Walls*, in the March, 1924, WEIRD TALES, the readers were unrestrained in their enthusiasm. *The Rats in the Walls* certainly ranks as one of the most chilling imaginative epics of horror ever conceived by an American writer. The atmosphere is charged with almost supernatural horror heightened by the scientific plausibility of the background.

The narrative deals with the discovery of a fallen underground realm, beneath an old English castle, where as recently as 1600 A. D. a decadent British family raised herds of beastmen to eat. The influence of the surroundings revives the dormant urge in one of the family's present-day descendants, bringing *The Rats in the Walls* to a close on a note of almost unendurable terror.

*The Outsider* has frequently been referred to as Lovecraft's outstanding horror tale, probably because it was used as the title story in the first major posthumous collection of his works. Unfortunately the closeness with which Lovecraft copies Poe (he begins by virtually paraphrasing *Berenice*) and the

breaks in the buildup of horror caused by the interpolation of stretches of fantasy considerably reduce the impact of the story for a good many readers. But its power can hardly be denied, despite its strongly derivative aspects.

Tales like *The Rats in the Walls* and *The Outsider*; tales of horror, terror and atmospheric beauty with undertones of scientific credibility created Lovecraft's first reputation in the period beginning in 1923. Typical of readers' reaction was the letter of internationally famous science fiction author Ray Cummings, which appeared in *The Eyrie* of WEIRD TALES for June, 1926.

"Who in blazes is H. P. Lovecraft?," he demanded. "I never heard the name before. If he is a present-day writer—which I cannot imagine him to be—he deserves to be world-famous. I read *The Outsider* and *The Tomb*. No need of telling you they are masterful stories. Quite beside their atmosphere—all those fictional elements which go to make up a real story—I felt and still feel, looking backward upon reading of them—somehow *ennobled*, as though my mind had profited (which indeed it had) by the reading. Never have I encountered any purer, more beautiful diction. They

sing; the true poetry of prose."

Who was Lovecraft, indeed. Certainly one of the strangest figures to arise in American letters. There has almost been as much printed about him as by him.

Following the death of his mother he had somewhat emerged from his chrysalis, traveled a bit and seen more of the world. When *The Outsider* was published in WEIRD TALES for April, 1926, he was married to an attractive, strong-willed and extremely successful business woman, Sonia H. Greene, who resided in Brooklyn, near Prospect Park.

Nothing in his background prepared him for the role of husband and provider. During almost the entire period of their marriage, his wife was the breadwinner, while Lovecraft, away from familiar surroundings and obsessed by a detestation of anything foreign, could scarcely tolerate contact with "alien hordes" that surrounded him in New York City. Although his wife was gracious, sympathetic and understanding, there must have been times when her undoubted love for him was put to a severe test.

Finally, suggesting that they continue their marriage

by correspondence, Lovecraft packed his bags, left his wife, and returned to his aunts in his beloved Providence.

A small weekly income of ten to fifteen dollars from a family interest in a sadly declining stone quarry, provided his main source of livelihood. This small sum was supplemented by occasional checks from editors, which became fewer and further apart as the years progressed.

He reverted to the living pattern of an earlier period. He worked by night and slept by day, keeping his shutters closed and the shades down. Perhaps due to the aftermath of a kidney ailment he had no tolerance for cold and scarcely moved out of a super-heated frame house during the winter months.

Ghost writing and literary assistance to would-be writers provided another meagre source of revenue. However, Lovecraft's method of revision usually consisted of discarding the client's draft completely and then rewriting the story from beginning to end. The majority of his so-called "collaborations" are almost entirely his own work and established a number of embryo reputations.

Lovecraft's most famous ghost-written story was based

on an idea dictated by the famous Magician, Harry Houdini, who was a stockholder in WEIRD TALES. The finished story, *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*, was featured on the cover of the May-June-July, 1924, first-anniversary issue of the magazine.

Lovecraft maintained a correspondence with as many as 100 friends and acquaintances simultaneously, frequently penning letters that ran to 30 to 40 pages. The warmth, brilliance and erudition of his letters created fierce friendships with individuals who were never to meet him, and provided inspiration for dozens of men and women destined later to achieve literary importance. Correspondence apparently served as a substitute for the lack of human companionship in Lovecraft's life and made it possible for him to retain his stability particularly during his final years when he became a virtual recluse. At the same time, the extraordinary volume of it prevented him from writing works of fiction that might have substantially increased his income.

Despite this, the period 1923 to 1926 was the high-point of Lovecraft's life. WEIRD TALES published nineteen of his tales during those years, tales writ-

ten between 1917 and 1921. Already Lovecraft was outgrowing the influences of Dunstany, Machen, Blackwood and a half dozen other writers whose work he profoundly admired. But he would never outgrow Poe.

What was developing was something creatively original—something that in presentation and method was distinctly Lovecraft's own. But that very difference was to presage tragic and unnecessary literary problems.

The first inkling of trouble came with the writing of *The Shunned House* in 1924. Lovecraft had traveled and seen more of the world and part of his sense of outsidership had vanished. The early scientific interests began to reassert themselves.

This was inevitable, since Lovecraft countenanced no form of mysticism whatsoever, embraced no religion nor believed in the existence of a deity. He was contemptuous of the concept of the supernatural. He could not even pretend that the strange horrors he wrote about transcended natural law.

Strange lines, for a writer of supernatural fiction, appeared in *The Shunned House*: "Such a thing was surely not a physical or biochemical impos-

sibility in the light of a newer science which includes the theories of relativity and intra-atomic action."

The *Shunned House* is in truth a horror science fiction story in which the ending is the discovery and destruction of a mammoth creature buried beneath a building. Though related with documentary preciseness it did not preclude passages of truly poetic beauty. But—Farnsworth Wright rejected it!

Scarcely knowing what to do with the story, Lovecraft sent it to his old friend, W. Paul Cook, who had previously published, in his amateur periodical, *THE VAGRANT*, three earlier Lovecraft tales, *Dagon*, *The Tomb*, and *The Statement of Randolph Carter* and had set in type but never run off *The Outsider* and *The Rats in the Wall*. In 1927 Cook had issued his legendary one-shot publication, *THE RECLUSE*, which contained Lovecraft's brilliant article, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. A second issue with 40 pages in proofs contained *The Strange High House in the Mist*, but was never finished.

Cook printed *The Shunned House* as a 59-page book in 1928 with an introduction by Lovecraft's close friend,

Frank Belknap Long. The book was never bound and only six copies were generally circulated out of an edition that could not have exceeded 100. After the death of a youthful friend of Lovecraft's, R. H. Barlow, additional copies were discovered which were procured and sold by August W. Derleth.

*Cool Air*, a fictional account of a scientist who succeeds in sustaining mental awareness and movement in his body after it had died (slowing down physical deterioration by living in a refrigerated apartment), was written by Lovecraft in 1926 and graphically illustrates his growing unwillingness to explain the strange and bizarre by other than scientific means. Wright also rejected this story but Lovecraft succeeded in selling it to TALES OF MAGIC AND MYSTERY, a short-lived competitor of WEIRD TALES, where it appeared in the March, 1928, issue.

*Pickman's Model*, a real shudder provoker published in the October, 1927, WEIRD TALES, deals with a masterful artist of the fantastic and evil whose bizarre subject matter is discovered to have been copied from real life. This is technically a tale of science fiction aimed at creating a mood of

horror. One sentence in the story served as the inspiration for Ralph Barbour Johnson's masterful science fiction horror story, *Far Below*, which elicited such a strongly favorable response when WEIRD TALES published it in its issue for June-July, 1939. That sentence reads: "There was a study called *Subway Accident*, in which a flock of vile things were clambering up from some unknown catacomb through a crack in the Boylston Street subway and attacking a crowd of people on the platform."

Lovecraft's entire new attitude burst into the open with the writing of *The Call of Cthulhu*, written in 1926 and published in WEIRD TALES for February, 1928. In that story, an accident causes the under-sea tomb of a legendary creature, Cthulhu, one of a group that "had come from the stars and brought their images with them," to rise to the surface. This story was a major presentation of the Cthulhu mythology couched in terms of science fiction instead of supernatural, incorporating references to R'lyeh, great stone city under the sea and the *Necronomicon*, horrendous tome penned by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, with its famous lines:

*That is not dead which  
can eternal lie,  
And with strange aeons  
even death may die.*

Following *The Call of Cthulhu*, Lovecraft wrote what he believed to be his supreme masterpiece, *The Colour Out of Space*. This pure, unadulterated science fiction tale is unquestionably a great story and if not the very finest single thing composed by Lovecraft, certainly a candidate to be included among his best three.

The story seizes the reader's interest immediately and builds magnificently, without flagging, to its tremendous conclusion. The characterization is excellent and the dialogue possibly the best ever done by Lovecraft, who generally adhered to straight narrative. His observations on the radioactivity of the entities from space is science of a high order, considering the year in which the story was written.

So full of high hope for this story, Lovecraft was stunned when it was rejected by WEIRD TALES. In a letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft stormed at the shortsightedness of Farnsworth Wright. Though WEIRD TALES printed numerous science fiction sto-

ries, Wright preferred the romantic adventure so popular in ARGOSY, or even straight action stories. Lovecraft submitted the story to ARGOSY, where it was also rejected as being a bit too "strong" for their readership, but the gimlet-eyed Hugo Gernsback did not let it get by him when it came his turn.

Blurbing the windfall in the September, 1927 AMAZING STORIES, Gernsback enthused: "Here is a totally different story that we can highly recommend. We could wax rhapsodical in our praise, as the story is one of the finest pieces of literature it has been our good fortune to read. The theme is original and yet fantastic enough to make it rise head and shoulders above many contemporary scientific stories. You will not regret having read this marvelous tale."

This should have been the tip off to Lovecraft that he no longer belonged in WEIRD TALES, especially after *The Colour Out of Space* received honorable mention in Edward J. O'Brien's BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES FOR 1928, a distinction only two other Lovecraft stories, *The Outsider* and *Pickman's Model*, had previously received.

The chronically tight economic straits of WEIRD TALES also conspired against Lovecraft. According to W. Paul Cook, Farnsworth Wright paid Lovecraft a higher word rate than most of his other authors. Lovecraft's stories of that period tended to get longer and longer and Wright simply could not afford to pay a premium for novelets and short novel lengths.

*The Dunwich Horror*, written in 1928 and published in WEIRD TALES for April, 1929, indicates by its sheer brilliance, following so closely after *The Colour Out of Space*, that Lovecraft was now at the very peak of his artistry. These stories were the beginnings of something completely original on the American scene and a major contribution to science fiction. With the excision of a few incantations, *The Dunwich Horror*, which fundamentally deals with the problems of the adjustment of Wilbur Whately, offspring of a creature from outer space who has mated with an idiot human girl, becomes science fiction.

Three years were to pass before Lovecraft would see another story published and yet some of his finest work was being produced during this period. The weird-fantasy novel,

*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, a precisely turned masterpiece composed in 1927-28, languished in manuscript until 1941 before it was published posthumously in WEIRD TALES. The major reason for the delay was that Lovecraft was too discouraged to even prepare it for submission.

Wright wanted for his magazine, particularly from Lovecraft, weird-horror tales that were short. Lovecraft gave him only science fiction stories that were long. Finally, Wright did take *The Whisperer in Darkness*, a novelette of 28,000 words, constructed with the most fastidious detail around the angle of a colony of aliens from out of space, attempting to recruit renegades for their ill-defined purposes.

The readers went wild! The popularity of *The Whisperer In the Darkness*, at the time of its publication, transcended anything he had ever done.

Lovecraft followed with a 45,000 word novel, *At the Mountains of Madness*, in 1931, actually a modernized sequel to Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, which, in the most detailed, scholarly fashion conceivable, outlined the history, habits, technology and civilization of the creatures of his Cthulhu Mythos. As a

bible of that mythology it is indispensable to the Lovecraft fan, but as a story, its length should have been trimmed in half as Wright suggested upon its rejection. Most of the padding is in the first half, after that it picks up momentum and includes some of Lovecraft's best writing.

The orderly build-up of background in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, the next story from Lovecraft's pen, written in 1932, is unsurpassed by any of his other works. Nevertheless, the story suffers from an ending of dream-like fantasy that does not fit the projected mood. Here we find echoes of *Dagon* as the genetically altered inhabitants of Innsmouth gradually assume the shapes of civilized creatures from antiquity, still dwelling in and beckoning from marvelous cities beneath the sea.

*The Shadow Out of Time*, written by Lovecraft in 1934, is a 30,000 word novelette, which, despite its length, retains all the fabulous imaginative qualities of good science fiction possessed by *At the Mountains of Madness*, without that novel's tediousness.

The nature and scope of the multitude of ideas in *Shadow Out of Time* reflect the unmis-

takeable influence of the soaring imagination of that cosmic philosopher, Olaf Stapledon, as expressed in *Last and First Men*. The plot of the story, wherein the dreams of a modern man about a civilization of the pre-human intelligences, 155 million years past are found to be probably true, is brought home to the reader with stunning impact and consummate artistry.

None of the remarkable science fiction excursions, *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Shadow Out of Time*, together with the magnificent science-fantasy *Shadow Over Innsmouth*, could find a home in WEIRD TALES.

A collaboration with E. Hoffman Price, *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*, was published in WEIRD TALES for July, 1934. A hybrid tale which begins as a weird story, continues as a sheer fantasy and ends as science fiction, it revolves around an overwhelmingly powerful situation involving a human ego taking over an alien's will on a distant world, then returning to earth in his outré guise. The human drama inherent in the idea was not properly exploited, but it is nonetheless memorable.

One by one, the acolytes influenced by Lovecraft follow-

ed as he lead the way to science fiction. As they did they began to sell to WONDER STORIES, ASTOUNDING STORIES and AMAZING STORIES, markets that specialized in such material. Such renowned names as Clark Ashton Smith, Donald Wandrei, Howard Wandrei, Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, C. L. Moore, Frank Belknap Long, Carl Jacobi, and Hazel Heald, (whose work he revised) were selling easily and readily, but the near-genius Lovecraft was pathetically grateful when William Crawford, who published the semi-professional magazine MARVEL TALES, offered to print without royalties, a 200-copy edition, in hard covers, of *Shadow Over Innsmouth*. This project eventually materialized in 1936 as a crude little volume, selling for only one dollar and not too well at that.

Meanwhile, Lovecraft tightened his food budget to thirty cents a day and, neglected his stomach to obtain postage-money for his ever-growing mass of correspondents, which had now become his method of escape from harsh reality.

Finally his friends could stand it no longer. Without his knowledge, Donald Wandrei (famed for *The Red Brain* in WEIRD TALES and *Colossus* in ASTOUNDING STORIES) secured

the manuscripts of *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Shadow Out of Time* and sent them to F. Orlin Tremaine, editor of ASTOUNDING STORIES. Tremaine bought them both and Lovecraft received the two largest checks of his entire writing career.

Four years earlier, Hugo Gernsback had bought a Lovecraft revision of *The Man of Stone* from Hazel Heald for WONDER STORIES. It seemed that in every instance where Lovecraft material was sent where it belonged, it was purchased. Yet, blinded by his outspoken disdain for the literary quality of the science fiction magazines, he had ignored these markets to his own detriment.

For its third anniversary issue, September, 1935, FANTASY MAGAZINE wanted something truly unusual. So its editor, Julius Schwartz, commissioned two round-robin stories to be written—one of science fiction and one of weird fiction. For the weird fiction story he had segments assigned to C. L. Moore, A. Merritt, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard and Frank Belknap Long. All went well until the story reached H. P. Lovecraft, then the science fiction syndrome switched on and the High Priest of Cthulhu con-

verted the story into an intergalactic tale of super science splendor. Even more unique, if excerpted, the Lovecraft portion became a complete story in itself. FANTASY MAGAZINE ended up printing two science fiction tales instead of one science fiction and one weird.

One of the last things Lovecraft did in science fiction was a collaboration with Kenneth Sterling titled *In the Walls of Eryx*, concerning a transparent maze on the planet Venus which traps unwary explorers.

When H. P. Lovecraft died the morning of March 15, 1937, only 47 years old, wasted to a pitiful shadow from the effects of Bright's disease and intestinal cancer, his greatest fame was yet to come but his influence on the body of science fiction was already felt.

One of the first to properly understand and interpret his contribution was Fritz Leiber, Jr., writing in the Fall, 1944, issue of THE ACOLYTE, who observed: "Perhaps Lovecraft's most important single contribution was the adoption of science-fiction material to the purpose of supernatural terror. The decline of at least naive belief in Christian theology, resulting in an immense

loss of prestige for Satan and his hosts, left the emotion of supernatural fear swinging around loose, without any well-recognized object. Lovecraft took up this loose end and tied it to the unknown but possible denizens of other planets and regions beyond the space-time continuum."

For that purpose, Lovecraft had propounded his theories on the writing of science fiction, the validity of which have been tested by time.

"The characters, though they must be natural, should be subordinated to the central marvel around which they are grouped," Lovecraft wrote. "The true hero of a marvel tale is not any human being, but simply a *set of phenomena* . . . All that a marvel story can ever be, in a serious way, is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood. Since marvel tales cannot be true to the events of life, they must shift their emphasis toward something to which they can be true; namely, certain wistful or restless moods of the human spirit, wherein it seeks to weave gossamer ladders of escape from the galling tyranny of time, space and natural laws."

That was his literary credo and it made him famous.

**THE END**

**FANTASTIC**

Twenty-five years ago the late H. P. Lovecraft, acting upon the urging of his correspondent Julius Schwartz, agreed to participate in the writing of a round-robin weird fantasy story for the Third Anniversary Issue of *Fantasy Magazine*, the pre-eminent science fiction fan magazine of its period. Collaborating with H. P. Lovecraft were such distinguished names as A. Merritt, C. L. Moore, Robert E. Howard and Frank Belknap Long. The portion written by Lovecraft, 2,400 words long, was virtually a complete short story in itself. This is its first appearance in a professional science fiction magazine.

# THE CHALLENGE FROM BEYOND

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

AS THE mist-blurred light of the sapphire suns grew more intense, the outlines of the globe ahead wavered and dissolved to a churning chaos. Its pallor and its motion and its music all blended themselves with the engulfing mist—bleaching it to a pale steel-color and setting it undulantly in motion. And the sapphire suns, too, melted imperceptibly into the graying infinity of shapeless pulsation.

Meanwhile the sense of forward, outward motion grew intolerably, incredibly, cosmically swift. Every standard

of speed known to earth seemed dwarfed, and Campbell knew that any such flight in physical reality would mean instant death to a human being. Even as it was—in this strange, hellish hypnosis or nightmare—the quasi-visual impression of meteor-like hurtling almost paralyzed his mind. Though there were no real points of reference in the gray, pulsing void, he felt that he was approaching and passing the speed of light itself. Finally his consciousness did go under—and merciful blackness swallowed everything.

It was very suddenly, and amidst the most impenetrable darkness, that thoughts and ideas again came to George Campbell. Of how many moments—or years—or eternities—had elapsed since his flight through the gray void, he could form no estimate. He knew only that he seemed to be at rest and without pain. Indeed, the absence of all physical sensation was the salient quality of his condition. It made even the blackness seem less solidly black—suggesting as it did that he was rather a disembodied intelligence in a state beyond physical senses, than a corporeal being with senses deprived of their accustomed objects of perception. He could think sharply and quickly—almost preternaturally so—yet could form no idea whatsoever of his situation.

Half by instinct, he realized that he was not in his own tent. True, he might have awaked there from a nightmare to a world equally black; yet he knew this was not so. There was no camp cot beneath him—he had no hands to feel the blankets and canvas surface and flashlight that ought to be around him—there was no sensation of cold in the air—no flap through which he

could glimpse the pale night outside . . . something was wrong, dreadfully wrong.

He cast his mind backward and thought of the fluorescent cube which had hypnotized him—of that, and all which had followed. He had known that his mind was going, yet had been unable to draw back. At the last moment there had been a shocking, panic fear—a subconscious fear beyond even that caused by the sensation of daemonic flight. It had come from some vague flash or remote recollection—just what, he could not at once tell. Some cell-group in the back of his head had seemed to find a cloudily familiar quality in the cube—and that familiarity was fraught with dim terror. Now he tried to remember what the familiarity and the terror were.

Little by little it came to him. Once—long ago, in connection with his geological life-work—he had read of something like that cube. It had to do with those debatable and disquieting clay fragments called the Eltdown Shards, dug up from pre-carboniferous strata in southern England thirty years before. Their shape and markings were so queer that a few scholars hinted at artificiality, and made wild conjectures about



"He had known that his mind was going, yet  
had been unable to draw back."

them and their origin. They came, clearly, from a time when no human beings could exist on the globe—but their contours and figurings were damnably puzzling. That was how they got their name.

It was not, however, in the writings of any sober scientist that Campbell had seen that reference to a crystal, disc-holding globe. The source was far less reputable, and infinitely more vivid. About 1912 a deeply learned Sussex clergyman of occultist leanings—the Reverend Arthur Brooke Winters-Hall—had professed to identify the markings on the Eltdown Shards with some of the so-called “pre-human heiroglyphs” that were persistently cherished and esoterically handed down in certain mystical circles, and had published at his own expense what purported to be a “translation” of the primal and baffling “inscriptions”—a “translation” still quoted frequently and seriously by occult writers. In this “translation”—a surprisingly long brochure in view of the limited number of “shards” existing—had occurred the narrative, supposedly of pre-human authorship, containing the now frightening reference.

As the story went, there dwelt on a world—and eventu-

ally on countless other worlds—of outer space a mighty order of worm-like beings whose attainments and whose control of nature surpassed anything within the range of terrestrial imagination. They had mastered the art of interstellar travel early in their career, and had peopled every habitable planet in their own galaxy—killing off the races they found.

Beyond the limits of their own galaxy—which was not ours—they could not navigate in person; but in their quest for knowledge of all space and time they discovered a means of spanning certain transgalactic gulfs with their minds. They devised peculiar objects—strangely energized cubes of a curious crystal containing hypnotic talismen and enclosed in space-resisting spherical envelopes of an unknown substance—which could be forcibly expelled beyond the limits of their universe, and which would respond to the attraction of cool solid matter only.

These, of which a few would necessarily land on various inhabited worlds in outside universe, formed the ether-bridges needed for mental communication. Atmospheric friction burned away the protecting envelope, leaving the

cube exposed and subject to discovery by the intelligent minds of the world where it fell. By its very nature, the cube would attract and rivet attention. This, when coupled with the action of light, was sufficient to set its special properties working.

The mind that noticed the cube would be drawn into it by the power of the disc, and would be sent on a thread of obscure energy to the place whence the disc had come—the remote world of the worm-like space-explorers across stupendous galactic abysses. Received in one of the machines to which each cube was attuned, the captured mind would remain suspended without body or senses until examined by one of the sominant race. Then it would, by an obscure process of interchange, be pumped of all its contents. The investigator's mind would now occupy the strange machine while the captive mind occupied the interrogator's worm-like body. Then, in another interchange, the interrogator's mind would leap across boundless space to the captive's vacant and unconscious body on the trans-galactic world—animating the alien tenement as best it might, and exploring the alien

world in the guise of one of its denizens.

When done with exploration, the adventurer would use the cube and its disc in accomplishing his return—and sometimes the captured mind would be restored safely to its own remote world. Not always, however, were the dominant race so kind. Sometimes, when a potentially important race capable of space travel was found, the worm-like folk would employ the cube to capture and annihilate minds by the thousands, and would extirpate the race for diplomatic reasons—using the exploring minds as agents of destruction.

In other cases sections of the worm-folk would permanently occupy a trans-galactic planet—destroying the captured minds and wiping out the remaining inhabitants preparatory to settling down in unfamiliar bodies. Never, however, could the parent civilization be quite duplicated in such a case; since the new planet would not contain all the materials necessary for the worm-race's arts. The cubes, for example, could be made only on the home planet.

Only a few of the numberless cubes sent forth ever found a landing and response on an inhabited world—since there was no such thing as

*aiming* them at goals beyond sight or knowledge. Only three, ran the story, had ever landed on peopled worlds in our own particular universe. One of these had struck a planet near the galactic rim two thousand billion years ago, while another had lodged three billion years ago on a world near the center of the galaxy. The third—and the only one ever known to have invaded the solar system—had reached our own earth 150,000,000 years ago.

Realizing that the changed individuals represented invading minds, the race's leaders had them destroyed—even at the cost of leaving the displaced minds exiled in alien space. They had had experience with even stranger transitions. Then, through a mental exploration of space and time, they formed a rough idea of what the cube was, they carefully hid the thing from light and sight, and guarded it as a menace. They did not wish to destroy a thing so rich in later experimental possibilities. Now and then some rash, unscrupulous adventurer would furtively gain access to it and sample its perilous powers despite the consequences—but all such cases were discovered, and safely and drastically dealt with.

Of this evil meddling the only bad result was that the worm-like outside race learned from the new exiles what had happened to the explorers on earth, and conceived a violent hatred of the planet and all its life-forms. They would have depopulated it if they could, and indeed sent additional cubes into space in the wild hope of striking it by accident in unguarded places—but that accident never came to pass.

The cone-shaped terrestrial beings kept the one existing cube in a special shrine as a relique and basis for experiments, 'till after aeons it was lost amidst the chaos of war and the destruction of the great polar city where it was guarded. When, fifty million years ago, the beings sent their minds ahead into the infinite future to avoid a nameless peril of inner earth, the whereabouts of the sinister cube from space were unknown.

This much, according to the learned occultist, the Eltdown Shards had said. What now made the account so obscurely frightful to Campbell was the minute accuracy with which the alien cube had been described. Every detail tallied—dimensions, consistency, heir-

oglyphed central disc, hypnotic effects. As he thought the matter over and over amidst the darkness of his strange situation, he began to wonder whether his whole experience with the crystal cube—indeed, its very existence—were not a nightmare brought on by some freakish subconscious memory of this old bit of extravagant, charlatanic reading. If so, though, the nightmare must still be in force; since his present apparently bodiless state had nothing of normality in it.

Of the time consumed by this puzzled memory and reflection, Campbell could form no estimate. Everything about his state was so unreal that ordinary dimensions and measurements became meaningless. It seemed an eternity, but perhaps it was not really long before the sudden interruption came. What happened was as strange and inexplicable as the blackness it succeeded. There was a sensation—of the mind rather than of the body—and all at once Campbell felt his thoughts swept or sucked beyond his control in tumultuous and chaotic fashion.

Memories arose irresponsibly and irrelevantly. All that he knew—all his personal background, traditions, experiences, scholarship, dreams,

ideas, and inspirations—well-ed up abruptly and simultaneously, with a dizzying speed and abundance which soon made him unable to keep track of any separate concept. The parade of all his mental contents became an avalanche, a cascade, a vortex. It was as horrible and vertiginous as his hypnotic flight through space when the crystal cube pulled him. Finally it sapped his consciousness and brought on fresh oblivion.

Another measureless blank—and then a slow trickle of sensation. This time it was physical, not mental. Sapphire light, and a low rumble of distant sound. There were tactile impressions—he could realize that he was lying at full length on something, though there was a baffling strangeness about the feel of his posture. He could not reconcile the pressure of the supporting surface with his own outlines—or with the outlines of the human form at all. He tried to move his arms, but found no definite response to the attempt. But, there were little, ineffectual nervous twitches all over the area which seemed to mark his body.

He tried to open his eyes more widely, but found himself unable to control their mechanism. The sapphire light

came in a diffused, nebulous manner, and could nowhere be voluntarily focused into definiteness. Gradually, though, visual images began to trickle in curiously and indecisively. The limits and qualities of vision were not those which he was used to, but he could roughly correlate the sensation with what he had known as sight. As this sensation gained some degree of stability, Campbell realized that he must still be in throes of nightmare.

He seemed to be in a room of considerable extent—of medium height, but with a large proportionate area. On every side—and he could apparently see all four sides at once—were high, narrowish slits which seemed to serve as combined doors and windows. There were singular low tables or pedestals, but no furniture of normal nature and proportions. Through the slits streamed floods of sapphire light, and beyond them could be mistily seen the sides and roofs of fantastic buildings like clustered cubes. On the walls—in the vertical panels between the slits—were strange markings of an oddly disquieting character. It was some time before Campbell understood why they disturb-

ed him so—then he saw that they were, in repeated instances, precisely like some of the heiroglyphs on the crystal cube's disc.

The actual nightmare element, though, was something more than this. It began with the living thing which presently entered through one of the slits, advancing deliberately toward him and bearing a metal box of bizarre proportions and glassy, mirror-like surfaces. For this thing was nothing human—nothing of earth—nothing even of man's myths and dreams. It was a gigantic, pale-gray worm or centipede, as large around as a man and twice as long, with a disc-like, apparently eyeless, cilia fringed head bearing a purple central orifice. It glided on its rear pairs of legs, with its fore part raised vertically—the legs, or at least two pairs of them, serving as arms. Along its spinal ridge was a curious purple comb, and fan-shaped tail of some gray membrane ended its grotesque bulk. There was a ring of flexible red spikes around its neck, and from the twistings of these came clicking, twanging sounds in measured, deliberate rhythms.

Here, indeed, was outré nightmare at its height, capricious fantasy at its apex.

But even this vision of delirium was not what caused George Campbell to lapse a third time into unconsciousness. It took one more thing—one final, unbearable touch—to do that. As the nameless worm advanced with its glistening box, the reclining man caught in the mirror-like sur-

face a glimpse of what should have been his own body. Yet—horribly verifying his disordered and unfamiliar sensations—it was not his own body at all that he saw reflected in the burnished metal. It was, instead, the loathsome, pale-grey bulk of one of the great centipedes. **THE END**

## COMING NEXT MONTH

**Alan Nourse, whose prize-winning novels appear regularly in our sister magazine, AMAZING STORIES, shifts gears and outlets this time to produce a chilling, thrilling, novellette for the June issue of FANTASTIC.**



Along with a group of unusual short stories is a masterfully told tale by Arthur Porges, "The Fiftieth Year of April." And science-fiction historian Sam Moskowitz contributes his critique of one of s-f's finest writers and finest minds, Olaf Stapledon (who wrote such famous novels as "Odd John," "Last and First Men," etc.).

**The June FANTASTIC goes on sale at your newsstand May 19. Be sure to reserve a copy.**

# WHEN THE SEA-KING'S AWAY...

*... The Gray Mouser and his love-sick  
friend, Fafhrd, risk their lives for a  
bit of—well, play.*

By FRITZ LEIBER

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

STRIPPED to his loincloth, underbelt, and with amulet pouch a-dangle under his chin, the Gray Mouser stretched lizardlike along the bowsprit of the sloop *Black Treasurer* and stared straight down into the hole in the sea. Sunlight unstrained by slightest wisp of cloud beat hotly on his deep-tanned back, but his belly was cold with the magic of the thing.

All round about the Inner Sea lay calm as a lake of mercury in the cellar of a wizard's castle. No ripple came from the unbounded horizon to south, east and north, nor rebounded from the endless vertically-fluted curtain of creamy rock that rose a bowshot to the west and was a good three bowshots high, which the Mouser and Fafhrd

had only yesterday climbed and atop which they had made a frightening discovery. The Mouser could have thought of those matters, or of the dismal fact that they were becalmed with little food and less water (and a tabooed cask of brandy) a weary sail west from Ool Hrusp, the last civilized port on this coast—or uncivilized either. He could have wondered about the seductive singing that had seemed to come from the sea last night, as of female voices softly improvising on the themes of waves hissing against sand, gurgling melodiously among rocks, and screaming wind-driven against icy coasts. Or he could perhaps best have pondered on Fafhrd's madness of yesterday afternoon, when the large



In this subterranean cavern the Mouser and Fafhrd found themselves taunted by beauty and surrounded by obstacles.

Northerner had suddenly started to babble dogmatically about finding for himself and the Mouser "girls under the sea" and had even begun to trim his beard and brush out his brown otterskin tunic and polish his best male costume jewelry so as to be properly attired to receive the submarine girls and arouse their desires. There was an old Simorgyan legend, Fafhrd had insisted, according to which on the seventh day of the seventh moon of the seventh year of the Sevens-Cycle the king of the sea journeyed to the other end of the earth, leaving his opalescently beautiful green wives and faintly silver-scaled slim concubines free to find them lovers if they could . . . and this, Fafhrd had stridently asserted he knew by the spectral calm and other occult tokens, was the place of the sea king's home and the eve of the day!

In vain had the Mouser pointed out to him that they had not sighted an even faintly feminine-looking fish in days, that there were absolutely no islets or beaches in view suitable for commerce with mermaids or for the sunbathing and primping of loreleis, that there were no black hulks whatever of wrecked pirate ships drifting about

that might conceivably have fair captives imprisoned below decks and so technically "under the sea," that the region beyond the deceptive curtain-wall of creamy rock was the last from which one could expect girls to come, that—to sum it up—the *Black Treasurer* had not fetched the faintest sort of girl-blink either to starboard or larboard for weeks. Fafhrd had simply replied with crushing conviction that the sea king's girls were there down below, that they were now preparing a magic channel or passage-way whereby air-breathers might visit them, and that the Mouser had better be ready like himself to hasten when the summons came.

The Mouser had thought that the heat and dazzle of the unremitting sun—together with the sudden intense yearnings normal to all sailors long at sea—must have deranged Fafhrd and he had dug up from the hold and unsuccessfully coaxed the Northerner to wear a wide-brimmed hat and slitted ice-goggles. It had been a great relief to the Mouser when Fafhrd had fallen into a profound sleep with the coming of night, though then the illusion—or reality—of the sweet siren-

singing had come to trouble his own tranquility.

Yes, the Mouser might well have thought of any of these matters, Fafhrd's prophetic utterances in particular, while he lay poised but unsweating in the hot sun along the stout bowsprit of the *Black Treasurer*, yet the fact is that he had mind only for the jade marvel so close that he could almost reach down a hand and touch the beginning of it.

It is well to approach all miracles and wonders by gradual stages or degrees and we can do this by examining another aspect of the glassy seascape of which the Mouser also might well have been thinking—but wasn't.

Although untroubled by swell, wavelet, or faintest ripple or quiver, the Inner Sea around the sloop was not perfectly flat. Here and there, scatteredly, it was dimpled with small depressions about the size and shape of shallow saucers, as if giant invisible featherweight water-beetles were standing about on it—though the dimples were not arranged in any six-legged or four-legged or even tripod patterns. Moreover, a slim stalk of air seemed to go down from the center of each dimple for an indefinite distance into the water, quite

like the tiny whirlpool that sometimes forms when the turquoise plug is pulled in the brimful golden bathtub of the Queen of the East (or the drain unstoppered in a bathtub of any humbler material belonging to any lowlier person)—except that there was no whirling of water in this case and the air-stalks were not twisted and knotted but straight, as though scores of slim-bladed rapiers with guards like shallow saucers but all as invisible as air had been plunged at random into the motionless waters around the *Black Treasurer*. Or as though a sparse forest of invisible lily pads with straight invisible stems had sprung up around the sloop.

Imagine such an air-stalked dimple magnified so that the saucer was not a palm's breadth but a good spearcast across and the rodlike sword-straight stalk not a finger-nail's width but a good four feet, imagine the sloop slid prow-foremost down into that shallow depression but stopping just short of the center and floating motionless there, imagine the bowsprit of the slightly tilted ship projecting over the exact center of the central tube or well of air, imagine a small, stalwart,

nutbrown man in a gray loin-cloth lying along the bowsprit, his feet braced against the foredeck rails, and looking straight down the tube . . . and you have the Gray Mouser's situation exactly!

To be *in* the Mouser's situation and peering down the tube was very fascinating indeed, an experience calculated to drive other thoughts out of any man's mind—or even any woman's! The water here, a bowshot from the creamy rock-wall, was green, remarkably clear, but too deep to allow a view of the bottom—soundings taken yesterday had shown it to vary between six score and seven score feet. Through this water the well-size tube went down as perfectly circular and as smooth as if it were walled with glass; and indeed the Mouser would have believed that it was so walled—that the water immediately around it had been somehow frozen or hardened without altering in transparency—except that at the slightest noise, such as the Mouser's coughing, little quiverings would run up and down it in the form of series of ring-shaped waves.

What power prevented the tremendous weight of the sea from collapsing the tube in

an instant, the Mouser could not begin to imagine.

Yet it was endlessly fascinating to peer down it. Sunlight transmitted through the sea water illuminated it to a considerable depth brightly if greenishly and the circular wall played odd tricks with distance. For instance, at this moment the Mouser, peering down slantwise through the side of the tube, saw a thick fish as long as his arm swimming around it and nosing up to it. The shape of the fish was very familiar yet he could not at once name it. Then, thrusting his head out to one side and peering down at the same fish through the clear water alongside the tube, he saw that the fish was three times the length of his body—in fact, a shark. The Mouser shivered and told himself that the curved wall of the tube must act like the reducing lenses used by a few artists in Lankhmar.

On the whole, though, the Mouser might well have decided in the end that the vertical tunnel in the water was an illusion born of sun-glare and suggestion and have put on the ice-goggles and stuffed his ears with wax against any more siren-singing and then perhaps swigged at the forbidden brandy and gone to

sleep, except for certain other circumstances footing the whole affair much more firmly in reality. For instance, there was a knotted rope securely tied to the bowsprit and hanging down the center of the tube and this rope creaked from time to time with the weight on it, and also there were threads of black smoke coming out of the watery hole (these were what made the Mouser cough), and last but not least there was a torch burning redly far down in the hole—so far down its flame looked no bigger than a candle's—and just beside the flame, somewhat obscured by its smoke and much tinied by distance, was the upward-peering face of Fafhrd!

The Mouser was inclined to take on faith the reality of anything Fafhrd got mixed up with, certainly anything that Fafhrd got physically into—the near-seven-foot Northerner was much too huge a hulk of solid matter to be picturable as strolling arm-in-arm with illusions.

The events leading up to the reality-footing facts of the rope, the smoke, and Fafhrd down the air-well had been quite simple. At dawn the sloop had begun to drift mysteriously among the water

dimples, there being no perceptible wind or current. Shortly afterwards it had bumped over the lip of the large saucer-shaped depression and slid to its present position with a little rush and then frozen there, as though the sloop's bowsprit and the hole were mutually desirous magnetic pole coupling together. Thereafter, while the Mouser had watched with eyes goggling and teeth a-chatter, Fafhrd had sighted down the hole, grunted with stolid satisfaction, slung the knotted rope down it, and then proceeded to array himself, seemingly with both war and love in mind—pomading his hair and beard, perfuming his hairy chest and armpits, putting on a blue silk tunic under the gleaming one of otterskin and all his silver-plated necklaces, arm-bands, brooches and rings as well, but also strapping long-sword and axe to his sides and lacing on his spiked boots. Then he had lit a long thin torch of resinous pine in the galley firebox and when it was flaming bravely he had, despite the Mouser's solicitous cries and tugging protests, gone out on the bowsprit and lowered himself into the hole, using thumb and forefinger of his right hand to grip the

torch and the other three fingers of that hand, along with his left hand, to grip the rope. Only then had he spoken, calling on the Mouser to make ready and follow him if the Mouser were more hot-blooded man than cold-blooded lizard.

The Mouser had made ready to the extent of stripping off most of his clothing—it had occurred to him it would be necessary to dive for Fafhrd when the hole became aware of its own impossibility and collapsed—and he had fetched to the foredeck his own sword Scalpel and dagger Cat's Claw in their case of oiled sealskin with the notion they might be needed against sharks. Thereafter he had simply poised on the bowsprit, as we have seen, observing Fafhrd's slow descent and letting the fascination of it all take hold of him.

At last he dipped his head and called softly down the hole, "Fafhrd, have you reached bottom yet?" frowning at the ring-shaped ripples even this gentle calling sent traveling down the hole and up again by reflection.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

Fafhrd's answering bellow, concentrated by the tube and coming out of it like a solid projectile, almost blasted the

Mouser off the bowsprit. Far more terrifying, the ring-ripples accompanying the bellow were so huge they almost seemed to close off the tube—narrowing it from four to two or three feet at any rate and dashing a spray of drops up into the Mouser's face as they reached the surface, lifting the rim upward as if the water were elastic, and then were reflected down the tube again.

The Mouser closed his eyes in a wince of horror, but when he opened them the hole was still there and the giant ring-ripples were beginning to abate.

Only a shade more loudly than the first time, but much more poignantly, the Mouser called down, "Fafhrd, don't do that again!"

"WHAT?"

This time the Mouser was prepared for it—just the same it was most horrid to watch those huge rings traveling up and down the tube in an arrow-swift green peristalsis. He firmly resolved to do no more calling, but just then Fafhrd started to speak up the tube in a voice of more rational volume—the rings produced were hardly thicker than a man's wrist.

*"Come on, Mouser! It's*

*easy! You only have to drop the last six feet!"*

"Don't drop it, Fafhrd!" the Mouser instantly replied. "Climb back up!"

*"I already have! Dropped, I mean. I'm on the bottom. Oh, Mouser . . .!"*

The last part of Fafhrd's call was in a voice so infused with a mingled awe and excitement that the Mouser immediately asked back down, "What? 'Oh, Mouser' — what?"

"It's wonderful, it's amazing, it's fantastic!" the reply came back from below—but this time very faintly all of a sudden, as if Fafhrd had somehow gone around an impossible bend or two in the tube.

"What is, Fafhrd?" the Mouser demanded—and this time his own voice raised moderate rings. "Don't go away, Fafhrd. But what is down there?"

*"Everything!"* the answer came back, not quite so faint this time.

"Are there girls?" the Mouser queried.

*"A whole world!"*

The Mouser sighed. The moment had come, he knew, as it always did, when outward circumstances and inner urges commanded an act, when curiosity and fascina-

tion tipped the scale of caution, when the lure of a vision and an adventure became so great and deep-hooking that he must respond to it or have his inmost self-respect eaten away.

Besides, he knew from long experience that the only way to extricate Fafhrd from the predicaments into which he got himself was to go fetch the perfumed and be-sworded lout!

So the Mouser sprang up lightly, clipped to his under-belt his sealskin-cased weapons, hung beside them in loops a short length of knotted line with a slip-noose tied in one end, made sure that the sloop's hatches were securely covered and even that the galley fire was tightly boxed, rattled off a short scornful prayer to the Gods of Lankhmar, and lowered himself off the bowsprit and down into the green hole.

The hole was chilly and it smelt of fish, smoke, and Fafhrd's pomade. The Mouser's main concern as soon as he got in it, he discovered to his surprise, was not to touch its glassy sides. He had the feeling that if he so much as lightly brushed it, the water's miraculous "skin" would rupture and he would be engulf-

ed—rather as an oiled needle floating on a bowl of water in its tiny hammock of “water skin” is engulfed and sinks when one pinks it. He descended rapidly knot by knot, supporting himself by his hands, barely touching his toes to the rope below, praying there would be no sway and that he would be able to check it if it started. It occurred to him he should have told Fafhrd to guy the rope at the bottom if he possibly could and above all have warned him not to shout up the tube while the Mouser descended—the thought of being squeezed by those dread water-rings was almost too much to bear. Too late now!—any word now would only too surely bring a bellow from the Northerner in reply.

First fears having been thus inspected though by no means banished, the Mouser began to take some note of his surroundings. The luminous green world was not just one emerald blank as it had seemed at first. There was life in it, though not in the greatest abundance: thin strands of scalloped maroon seaweed, near-invisible jellyfish trailing their opalescent fringes, tiny dark skates hovering like bats, small silvery backboned fish

gliding and darting—some of them, a blue-and-yellow-ringed and black-spotted school, even contesting lazily over the *Black Treasurer's* morning garbage, which the Mouser recognized by a large pallid beef-bone Fafhrd had gnawed briefly before tossing over-side.

Looking up, he was hard put not to gasp in horror. The hull of the sloop, pressing down darkly though pearly with bubbles, looked seven times higher above him than the distance he had descended by his count of the knots. Looking straight up the tube, however, he saw that the circle of deep blue sky had not shrunk correspondingly while the bowsprit bisecting it was still reassuringly thick. The curve of the tube had shrunk the sloop as it had the shark. The illusion was most weird and foreboding, nonetheless.

And now as the Mouser continued his swift descent, the circle overhead did grow smaller and more deeply blue, becoming a cobalt platter, a peacock saucer, and finally no more than a strange ultramarine coin that was the converging point of the tube and rope and in which the Mouser thought he saw a star flash. The Gray One puffed a few rapid kisses toward it, think-

ing how like they were to a drowning man's last bubbles. The light dimmed. The colors around him faded, the maroon seaweed turned gray, the fish lost their yellow rings, and the Mouser's own hands became blue as those of a corpse. And now he began to make out dimly the sea bottom, at the same extravagant distance below as the sloop was above, though immediately under him the bottom was oddly veiled or blanketed and only far off could he make out rocks and ridged stretches of sand.

His arms and shoulders ached. His palms burned. A monstrously fat grouper swam up to the tube and followed him down it, circling. The Mouser glared at it menacingly and it turned on its side and opened an impossibly large moon-crescent of mouth. The Mouser saw the razor teeth and realized it was the shark he'd seen or another like it, tinied by the lens of the tube. The teeth clashed, some of them inside the tube, only inches from his side. The water's "skin" did not rupture disastrously, although the Mouser got the eerie impression that the "bite" was bleeding a little water into the tube. The shark swam off

to continue its circling at a moderate distance and the Mouser refrained from any more menacing looks.

Meanwhile the fishy smell had grown stronger and the smoke must have been getting thicker too, for now the Mouser coughed in spite of himself, setting the water rings shooting up and down. He fought to suppress an anguished curse—and at that moment his toes no longer touched rope. He unloosed the extra coil from his belt, went down three more knots, tightened the slip-noose above the second knot from the bottom, and continued on his way.

Five handholds later his feet found a footing in cold muck. He gratefully unclenched his hands, working his cramped fingers, at the same time calling "Fafhrd!" softly but angrily. Then he looked around.

He was standing in the center of a large low tent of air, which was floored by the velvety sea-muck in which he had sunk to his ankles and roofed by the leadenly gleaming undersurface of the water—not evenly though, but in swells and hollows with ominous downward bulges here and there. The air-tent was about ten feet high at the foot of the tube. Its diameter

seemed at least twenty times that, though exactly how far the edges extended it was impossible to judge for several reasons: the great irregularity of the tent's roof, the difficulty of even guessing at the extent of some outer areas where the distance between water-roof and muck-floor was measurable in inches, the fact that the gray light transmitted from above hardly permitted decent vision for more than two dozen yards, and finally the circumstance that there was considerable torch-smoke in the way here and there, writhing in thick coils along the ceiling, collecting in topsy-turvy pockets, though eventually gliding sluggishly up the tube.

What fabulous invisible "tent-poles" propped up the oceans-heavy roof the Mouser could no more conceive than the force that kept the tube open.

Writhing his nostrils distastefully, both at the smoke and the augmented fishy smell, the Mouser squinted fiercely around the tent's full circumference. Eventually he saw a dull red glow in the black smudge where it was thickest and a little later Fafhrd emerged. The reeking flame of the pine torch, which was

still no more than half consumed, showed the Northerner bemired with seamuck to his thighs and hugging gently to his side with his bent left arm a dripping mess of variously gleaming objects. He was stooped over somewhat, for the roof bulged down where he stood.

"Blubber brain!" the Mouser greeted him. "Put out that torch before we smother! We can see better without it. Oh oaf, to blind yourself with smoke for the sake of light!"

To the Mouser there was obviously only one sane way to extinguish the torch—jab it in the wet muck underfoot—but Fafhrd, though evidently most agreeable to the Mouser's suggestion in a vacantly smiling way, had another idea. Despite the Mouser's anguished cry of warning, he casually thrust the flaming stick into the watery roof.

There was a loud hissing and a large downward puff of steam and for a moment the Mouser thought his worst dreads had been realized, for an angry squirt of water from the quenching point struck Fafhrd in the neck. But when the steam cleared it became evident that the rest of the sea was not going to follow the squirt, at least not at once, though now there was an omi-

nous lump, like a rounded tumor, in the roof where Fafhrd had thrust the torch and from it water ran steadily in a stream thick as a quill, digging a tiny crater where it struck the muck below.

"Don't do that!" the Mouser commanded in unwise fury.

"This?" Fafhrd asked gently, poking a finger through the ceiling next to the dripping bulge. Again came the angry squirt, diminishing at once to a trickle, and now there were two bulges closely side by side, quite like breasts.

"Yes, *that*—not again," the Mouser managed to reply, his voice distant and high because of the self-control it took him not to rage at Fafhrd and so perhaps provoke even more reckless probings.

"Very well, I won't," the Northerner assured him. "Though," he added, gazing thoughtfully at the twin streams, "it would take those dribblings years to fill up this cavity."

"Who speaks of years down here?" the Mouser snarled at him. "Dolt! Iron Skull! What made you lie to me? 'Everything' was down here, you said—a whole world.' And what do I find? Nothing! A miserable little cramp-roofed field of stinking mud!" And the Mouser stamped a foot in

rage, which only splashed him foully, while a puffed, phosphorescent-whiskered fish expiring on the mire looked up at him reproachfully.

"That rude treading," Fafhrd said softly, "may have burst the silver-filigreed skull of a princess. 'Nothing,' say you? Look you then, Mouser, what treasure I have dugged from your stinking field."

And as he came toward the Mouser, his big feet gliding gently through the top of the muck for all the spikes on his boots, he gently rocked the gleaming things cradled in his left arm and let the fingers of his right hand drift gently among them.

"Aye," he said, "jewels and gauds undreamed by those who sail above, yet all teased by me from the ooze while I sought another thing."

"What other thing, Gristle Dome?" the Mouser demanded harshly, though eyeing the gleaming things hungrily.

"The path," Fafhrd said a little querulously, as if the Mouser must know what he meant. "The path that leads from some corner or fold of this tent of air to the sea-king's girls. These things are a sure promise of it. Look you, here, Mouser." And he opened his bent left arm a little and lifted out most delicately with

thumb and finger-tips a life-size metallic mask.

Impossible to tell in that drained gray light whether the metal were gold or silver or tin or even bronze and whether the wide wavy streaks down it, like the tracks of blue-green sweat and tears, were verdigris or slime. Yet it was clear that it was female, patrician, all-knowing yet alluring, loving yet cruel, hauntingly beautiful. The Mouser snatched it eagerly yet angrily and the whole lower face crumpled in his hand, leaving only the proud forehead and the eyeholes staring at him more tragically than eyes.

The Mouser flinched back, expecting Fafhrd to strike him, but in the same instant he saw the Northerner turning away and lifting his straight right arm, index finger a-point, like a slow semaphore.

"You were right, oh Mouser!" Fafhrd cried joyously. "Not only my torch's smoke but its very light blinded me. See! See the path!"

The Mouser's gaze followed Fafhrd's pointing. Now that the smoke was somewhat abated and the torch-flame no longer shot out its orange rays, the patchy phosphorescence of the muck and of the dying sea-

things scattered about had become clearly visible despite the muted light filtering from above.

The phosphorescence was not altogether patchy, however. Beginning at the hole from which the knotted rope hung, a path of unbroken greenish-yellow witch-fire a long stride in width led across the muck toward an unpromising-looking corner of the tent of air where it seemed to disappear.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser automatically enjoined, but the Northerner was already moving past him, taking long dreamlike strides. By degrees his cradling arm unbent and one by one his ooze-won treasures began to slip from it into the muck. He reached the path and started along it, placing his spike-soled feet in the very center.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser repeated—a little hopelessly, almost whiningly, it must be admitted. "Don't follow it, I say. It leads only to squidgy death. We can still go back up the rope, aye, and take your loot with us . . ."

But meanwhile he himself was following Fafhrd and snatching up, though more cautiously than he had the mask, the objects his comrade let slip. It was not worth the

effort, the Mouser told himself as he continued to do it: though they gleamed enticingly, the various necklaces, tiaras, filigreed breast-cups and great-pinned brooches weighed no more and were no thicker than plaitings of dead ferns. He could not seem to equal Fafhrd's delicacy and they fell apart at his touch.

Fafhrd turned back to him a face radiant as one who dreams sleeping of ultimate ecstasies. As the last ghost-gaud slipped from his arm, he said, "They are nothing—no more than the mask—mere sea-gnawed wraiths of treasure. But oh, the promise of them, Mouser! Oh, the promise!"

And with that he turned forward again and stooped under a large downward bulge in the low leaden-hued roof.

The Mouser took one look back along the glowing path to the small circular patch of sky-light with the knotted rope falling in the center of it. The twin streams of water coming from the two "wounds" in the ceiling seemed to be running more strongly—where they hit, the muck was splashing. Then he followed Fafhrd.

On the other side of the bulge the ceiling rose again to

more than head-height, but the walls of the tent narrowed in sharply. Soon they were treading along a veritable tunnel in the water, a leaden arch-roofed passageway no wider than the phosphorescently yellow-green path that floored it. The tunnel curved just enough now to left, now to right, so that there was no seeing any long distance ahead. From time to time the Mouser thought he heard faint whistlings and moanings echoing along it. He stepped over a large crab that was backing feebly and saw beside it a dead man's hand emerging from the glowing muck, one shred-fleshed finger pointing the way they were taking.

Fafhrd half turned his head and muttered gravely, "Mark me, Mouser, there's magic in this somewhere!"

The Mouser thought he had never in his life heard a less necessary remark. He felt considerably depressed. He had long given up his puerile pleadings with Fafhrd to turn back—he knew there was no way of stopping Fafhrd short of grappling with him, and a tussle that would invariably send them crashing through one of the watery walls of the tunnel was by no means to his liking. Of course, he could always turn back alone. Still . . .

With the monotony of the tunnel and of just putting one foot after the other into the clinging muck and withdrawing it with a soft *plop*, the Mouser found time to become oppressed too with the thought of the weight of the water overhead. It was as though he walked with all the ships of the world on his back. His imagination would picture nothing but the tunnel's instant collapse. He hunched his head into his shoulders and it was all he could do not to drop to his elbows and knees and then stretch himself face down in the muck with the mere anticipation of the event.

The sea seemed to grow a little whiter ahead and the Mouser realized the tunnel was approaching the under-reaches of the curtain-wall of creamy rock he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday. The memory of that climb let his imagination escape at last, perhaps because it fitted with the urge that he and Fafhrd somehow lift themselves out of their present predicament.

It had been a difficult ascent, although the pale rock had proved hard and reliable, for footholds and ledges had been few and they had had to rope up and go by way of a branching chimney, often driving pitons into cracks to cre-

ate a support where none was—but they had had high hopes of finding fresh water and game, too, likely enough, so far west of Ool Hrusp and its hunters. At last they had reached the top, aching and a little blown from their climb and quite ready to throw themselves down and rest while they surveyed the landscape of grassland and stunted trees that they knew to be characteristic of other parts of this most lonely peninsula stretching southwestward between the Inner and Outer Seas.

Instead they had found . . . nothing. Worse than nothing, in a way, if that were possible. The longed-for top proved to be the merest edge of rock, three feet wide at the most and narrower some places, while on the other side the rock descended even more precipitously than on the side which they had climbed—indeed it was deeply undercut in large areas—and for an equal or rather somewhat greater distance. From the foot of this dizzying drop a wilderness of waves, foam and rocks extended to the horizon.

*They had found themselves clinging a-straddle to a veritable rock curtain, paper-thin in respect to its height and hori-*

zontal extent, between the Inner and what they realized must be the Outer Sea, which had eaten its way across the unexplored peninsula in this region but not yet quite broken through. As far as eye could see in either direction the same situation obtained, though the Mouser fancied he could make out a thickening of the wall in the direction of Ool Hrusp.

Fafhrd had laughed at the surprise of the thing—gargantuan bellows of mirth that had made the Mouser curse him silently for fear the mere vibrations of his voice might shatter and tumble down the knife-edged saddle on which they perched. Indeed the Mouser had grown so angry with Fafhrd's laughter that he had sprung up and nimbly danced a jig of rage on the rock-ribbon, thinking meanwhile of wise Sheelba's saying: "Know it or not, man treads between twin abysses a tightrope that has neither beginning nor end."

Having thus expressed their feelings of horrified shock, each in his way, they had surveyed the yeasty sea below more rationally. The amount of surf and the numbers of emergent rocks showed it to be more shallow for some distance out—even likely, Fa-

fhrd had opined, to drain itself at low tide, for his moon-lore told him that tides in this region of the world must at the moment be near high. Of the emergent rocks, one in particular stood out: a thick pillar two bowshot from the curtain wall and as high as a four-story house. The pillar was spiraled by ledges that looked as if they were in part of human cutting, while set in its thicker base and emerging from the foam there appeared an oddly criss-crossed weed-fringed rectangle that looked mightily like a large stout door—though where such a door might lead and who would use it were perplexing questions indeed.

Then, since there was no answering that question or others and since there was clearly no fresh water or game to be had from this literal shell of a coast, they had descended back to the Inner Sea and the *Black Treasurer*, though now each time they had driven a piton it had been with the fear that the whole wall might split and collapse . . .

"Ware rocks!"

Fafhrd's warning cry pulled the Mouser out of his waking memory-dream—dropped him in a split instant as if it were, from the upper reaches of the

creamy curtain-wall to a spot almost an equal distance below its sea-gnawed base. Just ahead of him three thick lumpy daggers of rock thrust down inexplicably through the gray watery ceiling of the tunnel. The Mouser shudderingly wove his head past them, as Fafhrd must have, and then looking beyond his comrade he saw more rocky protuberances encroaching on the tunnel from all sides—saw, in fact, as he strode on, that the tunnel was changing from one of water and muck to one roofed, walled and floored with solid rock. The water-born light faded away behind them, but the increasing phosphorescence natural to the animal life of a sea cavern almost compensated for it, boldly outlining their wet stony way and here and there glowing with especial brilliance and variety of color from the bands, portholes, feelers and eye-rings of many a dying fish and crawler.

The Mouser realized they must be passing far under the curtain-wall he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday and that the tunnel ahead must be leading under the Outer Sea they had seen tossing with billows. There was no longer that immediate oppressive sense of a crushing weight of

ocean overhead or of brushing elbows with magic. Yet the thought that if the tube, tent and tunnel behind them should collapse, then a great gush of solid water would rush into the rock-tunnel and engulf them, was in some ways even worse. Back under the water roof he'd had the feeling that even if it should collapse he might reach the surface alive by bold swimming and conceivably drag the cumbered Fafhrd up with him. But here they'd be hopelessly trapped.

True, the tunnel seemed to be ascending, but not enough or swiftly enough to please the Mouser. Moreover, if it did finally emerge, it would be to that shattering welter of foam they'd peered down at yesterday. Truly, the Mouser found it hard to pick between his druthers, or even to have any druthers at all. His feelings of depression and doom gradually sank to a new and perhaps ultimate nadir, and in a desperate effort to wrench them up he deliberately imagined to himself the zestiest tavern he knew in Lankhmar—a great gray cellar all a-flare with torches, wine streaming and spilling, tankards and coins a-clink, voices braying and roaring, poppy fumes a-twirl, naked girls writhing in lascivious dances . . .

*"Oh, Mouser . . . !"*

Fafhrd's deep and feelingful whisper and the North-erner's large hand against his chest halted the Mouser's plodding, but whether it fetched his spirit back below the Outer Sea or simply produced a fantastic alteration in its escapist imagining, the Gray One could not at once be sure.

They were standing in the entrance to a vast submarine grotto that rose in multiple steps and terraces toward an indefinite ceiling from which cascaded down like silver mist a glow about thrice the strength of moonlight. The grotto reeked of the sea like the tunnel behind them; it was likewise scattered with expiring fish and eels and small octopuses; molluscs tiny and huge clustered on its walls and corners between weedy draperies and silver-green veils; while its various niches and dark circular doorways and even the stepped and terraced floor seemed shaped in part at least by the action of rushing waters and grinding sand.

The silver mist did not fall evenly but concentrated itself in swirls and waves of light on three terraces. The first of these was placed centrally and only a level stretch and then a few low ledges separated it from the tunnel's mouth. Upon

this terrace was set a great stone table with weed-fringed sides and mollusc-crusts legs but level top of grained and spotted marble polished to what looked an exquisite smoothness. A great golden basin stood on one end of this table and two golden goblets beside the basin.

Beyond the first terrace rose a second uneven flight of steps with areas of menacing shadow pressing upon it from either side. Behind the areas of darkness were a second and third terrace that the silvery light favored. The one on the right—Fafhrd's side, to call it that, for he stood to the right in the tunnel mouth—was walled and arched with mother-of-pearl, almost as if it were one gigantic shell, and pearly swells rose from its floor like heaped satin pillows. The one on the Mouser's side, slightly below, was backed by an arras of maroon seaweed that fell in wide scalloped strands and billowed on the floor. From between these twin terraces the flight of irregular steps or ledges continued upward into a third area of darkness.

Shifting shadows and dark wavings and odd gleamings hinted that the three areas of darkness might be occupied;

there was no doubt that the three bright terraces were. On the upper terrace on Fafhrd's side stood a tall and opulently beautiful woman whose golden hair rose in spiral masses like a shell and whose dress of golden fishnet clung to her pale greenish flesh. Her fingers showed greenish webs between them and on the side of her neck as she turned were faint scorings like a fish's gills.

On the Mouser's side was a slimmer yet exquisitely feminine creature whose silver flesh seemed to merge into silver scales on shoulders, back and flanks under her robe of filmy violet and whose short dark hair was split back from her low forehead's center by a scalloped silver crest a hand's breadth high. She too showed the faint neck-scorings and finger webs.

The third figure, standing a-crouch behind the table, was sexlessly scrawny, with an effect of wiry old age, and either gowned or clad closely in jet black. A shock of rope-thick hairs dark red as iron rust covered her head while her gills and finger webs were starkly apparent.

Each of these women wore a metal mask resembling in form and expression the eaten-away one Fafhrd had found

in the muck. That of the first figure was gold; of the second, silver; of the third, green-spotted sea-darkened bronze.

The first two women were still, not as if they were part of a show but as though they were observing one. The scrawny black sea-witch was vibrantly active, although she hardly moved on her black-webbed toes except to shift position abruptly and ever so slightly now and then. She held a short whip in either hand, the webs folded outside her bent knuckles, and with these whips she maintained and directed the swift spinning of a half dozen objects on the polished table top. What these objects were it was impossible to say, except that they were roughly oval. Some by their semi-transparency as they spun might have been large rings or saucers, others actual tops by their opacity. They gleamed silver and green and golden and they spun so swiftly and moved in such swift-intersecting orbits as they spun that they seemed to leave gleaming wakes of spin in the misty air behind them. Whenever one would flag in its spinning and its true form begin to blink into visibility, she'd bring it back up to speed again with two or three rapid

whip-flips; or should one veer too close to the table's edge or the golden basin, or threaten to collide with another, she'd redirect its orbit with deft lashings; now and again, with incredible skill, she'd flick one so that it jumped high in the air and then flick it again at landing so that it went on spinning without a break, leaving above it an evanescent loop of silvery air-spin.

These whirring objects made the pulsing moans and whistles the Mouser had heard along the tunnel.

As he watched them now and listened to them, the Gray One became convinced—partly because the silvery curving tubes of spin made him think of the air shaft he'd rope-climbed and the air-tunnel he'd plodded—that these spinning things were a crucial part of the magic that had created and held open the path through the Inner Sea behind them, and that once they should cease whirring then the shaft and tent and tunnel would collapse and the waters of the Inner Sea speed through the rock-tunnel into this grotto.

And indeed the scrawny black sea-witch looked to the Mouser as though she'd been whipping her tops for hours and—more to the point—

would be able to keep on whipping them for hours more. She showed no signs of her exertion save the rhythmic rise and fall of her breastless chest and the extra whistle of breath through the mouth-slit of her mask and the gape and close of her gills.

Now she seemed for the first time to see him and Fafhrd, for without leaving off her whipping she thrust her bronze mask toward them, red ropes a-spill across its green-blotched forehead, and glared at them—hungrily, it seemed. Yet she made them no other menace, but after a searching scrutiny jerked back her head twice, as if for a sign that they should go past her. At the same time the green and silver queens beckoned to them languorously.

This woke the Mouser and Fafhrd from their dazed watching and they complied eagerly enough, though in passing the table the Mouser sniffed wine and paused to take up the two golden goblets, handing one to his comrade. They drained them despite the green hue of the drink, for the stuff smelt right and was fiery sweet yet tart.

As he drank, the Mouser saw into the golden bowl. It held no store of green wine,

but was filled almost to the brim with a crystal fluid that might or might not have been water. On the fluid floated a model, hardly a finger long, of the hull of a black boat. A tiny tube of air seemed to go down from its prow.

But there was no time for closer looking, for Fafhrd was moving on. The Mouser stepped up into his area of shadow to the left as Fafhrd had done to the right . . . and as he so stepped, there sidled from the shadows before him two blue-ly pallid men armed each with a pair of wave-edged knives. They were sailors, he judged from their pigtailed and shuffling gait, although they were both naked, and they were indisputably dead—by token of their unhealthy color, their carelessness of the thick slime streaking them, the way their bulging eyes showed only whites and the bottom crescent of the irises, and the fact that their hair, ears, and other portions of their anatomies looked somewhat fish-chewed. Behind them waddled a scimitar-wielding dwarf with short spindle legs and monstrous head and gills—a veritable walking embryo. His great saucer eyes too were the up-turned ones of a dead thing, which did not make the Mouser feel any easier as he whisk-

ed Scalpel and Cat's Claw out of their sealskin case, for the three converged on him confidently where he stood and rapidly shifted to block his way as he sought to circle behind them.

It was probably just as well that the Mouser had at that moment no attention to spare for his comrade's predicament. Fafhrd's area of shadow was black as ink toward the wall, and as the Northerner strode through the margin of it past a ridged and man-sized knob of rock rising from the ledges and between him and the Mouser, there lifted from the further blackness—like eight giant serpents rearing from their lair—the thick, sinuous, crater-studded arms of a monstrous octopus. The sea-beast's movement must have struck internal sparks, for it simultaneously flashed into a yellow-streaked purplish iridescence, showing Fafhrd its baleful eyes large as plates, its cruel beak big as the prow of an overturned skiff, and the rather unlikely circumstance that the end of each mighty tentacle wrapped powerfully around the hilt of a gleaming broadsword.

Snatching at his own sword and axe, Fafhrd backed away from the be-weaponed squid against the ridged knob of

rock. Two of the ridges, being the vertical shell-edges of a mollusc four feet across, instantly closed on the slack of his otterskin tunic, firmly holding him there.

Greatly daunted but determined to live nevertheless, the Northerner swung his sword in a great figure eight, the lower loop of which almost ticked the floor, while the upper loop rose above his head like a tall arching shield. This double-petalled flower of steel baffled the four blades or so with which the octopus first came chopping at him rather cautiously, and as the sea monster drew back his arms for another volley of slashes, Fafhrd's left arm licked out with his axe and chopped through the nearest tentacle.

His adversary hooted loudly then and struck repeatedly with all his swords, and for a space it looked as though Fafhrd's universal parry must surely be pierced, but then the axe licked out again from the center of the sword-shield, once, twice, and two more tentacle tips fell and the swords they gripped with them. The octopus drew back then out of reach and sprayed a great mist-cloud of stinking black ink from its tube, under cover of which it might work its will unseen on the pinned North-

erner, but even as the blinding mist billowed toward him Fafhrd hurled his axe at the huge central head. And although the black fog hid the axe almost as soon as it left his hand, the heavy weapon must have reached a vital spot, for immediately the octopus hurled its remaining swords about the grotto at random (fortunately striking no one although they made a fine clatter) as its tentacles thrashed in dying convulsions.

Fafhrd drew a small knife, slashed his otterskin tunic down the front and across the shoulders, stepped out of it with a contemptuous wave to the mollusc as if to say, "Have it for supper if you will," and turned to see how his comrade fared. The Mouser, bleeding greenly from two trivial wounds in ribs and shoulder, had just finished severing the major tendons of his three hideous opponents—this having proved the only way to immobilize them when various mortal wounds had slowed them in no way at all nor caused them to bleed one drop of blood of any color.

He smiled sickishly at Fafhrd and turned with him toward the upper terraces. And now it became clear that the Green and Silver Ones were at

least in one respect true queens, for they had not fled the prodigious battles as lesser women might, but abided them and now waited with arms lightly outstretched. Their gold and silver masks could not smile, but their bodies did, and as the two adventurers mounted toward them from the shadow into the light (the Mouser's little wounds changing from green to red, but Fafhrd's blue tunic staying pretty inky) it seemed to them that veily finger-webs and light neck-scorings were the highest points of female beauty. The lights faded somewhat on the upper terraces, though not on the lower where the monotonous six-toned music of the tops kept reassuringly on, and the two heroes entered each into that dark lustrous realm where all thoughts of wounds are forgotten and all memories of even the zestiest Lankhmar wine-cellar grow flat, and the Sea, our cruel mother and loving mistress, repays all debts.

A great soundless jar, as of the rock-solid earth moving, recalled the Mouser to his surroundings. Almost simultaneously the whir of one of the tops mounted to a high-pitched whine ending in a tinkly crash. The silver light began to pulse and flicker wildly

throughout the grotto. Springing to his feet and looking down the steps, the Mouser saw a memory-etching sight: the rust-topped black sea witch whipping wildly at her rebellious tops, which leaped and bounded about the table like fierce silver weasels, while through the air around her from all sides but chiefly from the tunnel there converged an arrow-swift flight of flying fish, skates, and ribbon-edged eels, all inky black and with tiny jaws agape.

At that instant Fafhrd seized him by the shoulder and jerked him fully around, pointing up the ledges. A silver lightning flash showed a great cross-beamed, weed-fringed door at the head of the rocky stairs. The Mouser nodded violently—meaning he understood it resembled and must be the door they had yesterday seen from the ribbony cliff-summit — and Fafhrd, satisfied his comrade would follow him, dashed toward it up the ledges.

But the Mouser had a different thought and darted in the opposite direction in the face of an ominous wet reeking wind. Returning a dozen lightning-flashes later, he saw the green and silver queens disappearing into round black tunnel mouths in the rock to

either side of the terrace and then they were gone.

As he joined Fafhrd in the work of unsettling the cross-bars of the great weedy door and drawing its massive rusty bolts, it quivered under a portentous triple knocking as though someone had smote it thrice with a long-skirted cloak of chain mail. Water squirted under it and through the lower third of the central vertical crack. The Mouser looked behind him then, with the thought that they might yet have to seek another avenue of escape . . . and saw a great white-headed pillar of water jetting more than half the height of the grotto from the mouth of the tunnel connecting with the Inner Sea. Just then the silver cavern-light went out, but almost immediately other light spilled from above. Fafhrd had heaved open half of the great door. Green water foamed about their knees and subsided. They fought their way through and as the great door slammed behind them under a fresh surge of water, they found themselves sloshing about on a wild beach blown with foam, swimming with surf, and floored chiefly with large flat water-worn oval rocks like giants' skipping stones. The Mouser,

turned shoreward, squinted desperately at the creamy cliff two bowshot away, wondering if they could possibly reach it through the mounting tide and climb it if they did.

But Fafhrd was looking seaward. The Mouser again felt himself shoulder-grabbed, spun around, and this time dragged up a curving ledge of the great tower-rock in the base of which was set the door through which they had just emerged. He stumbled, cutting his knees, but was jerked ruthlessly on. He decided that Fafhrd must have some very good reason for so rudely enjoining haste and thereafter did his best to hurry without assistance at Fafhrd's heels up the spiraling ramplike ledge. On the second circling he stole a seaward look, gasped, and increased the speed of his mad dizzy scramble.

The stony beach below was drained and only here and there patched with huge gouts of spume, but roaring toward them from outer ocean was a giant wave that looked almost half as high as the pillar they were mounting—a great white wall of water flecked with green and brown and studded with rocks—a wave such as distant earthquakes send charging across the sea like a massed cavalry of monsters.

Behind that wave came a taller one, and behind that a third taller still.

The Mouser and Fafhrd were three gasping circles higher when the stout tower shuddered and shook to the crashing impact of the first giant wave. Simultaneously the landward door at its base burst open from within and the cavern-traveling water from the Inner Sea gushed out creamily to be instantly engulfed. The crest of the wave caught at Fafhrd's and the Mouser's ankles without quite tripping them or much slowing their progress. The second and third did likewise, although they had gained another circle before each impact. There was a fourth wave and a fifth, but no higher than the third. The two adventurers reached the stumpy summit and cast themselves down on it, clutching at the still-shaking rock and slewing around to watch the shore—Fafhrd noting the astonishing minor circumstance that the Mouser was gripping between his teeth in the corner of his mouth a small black cigar.

The creamy curtain wall shuddered at the impact of the first wave and great cracks ran across it. The second wave shattered it and it fell into the

third with an explosion of spray, displacing so much salt water that the return wave almost swamped the tower, its dirty crest tugging at the Mouser's and Fafhrd's fingers and licking along their sides. Again the tower shook and rocked beneath them but did not fall and that was the last of the great waves. Fafhrd and the Mouser circled down the spiraling ledges until they caught up with the declining sea, which still deeply covered the door at the tower's base. Then they looked landward again, where the mist raised by the catastrophe was dissipating.

A full half mile of the curtain wall had collapsed from base to crest, its shards vanishing totally beneath the waves, and through that gap the higher waters of the Inner Sea were pouring in a flat sullen tide that was swiftly obliterating the choppy aftermath of the earthquake waves from the Outer Sea.

On this wide river in the sea the *Black Treasurer* appeared from the mist riding straight toward their refuge rock.

Fafhrd cursed superstitiously. Sorcery working against him he could always accept, but magic operating in his favor he invariably found disturbing.

As the sloop drew near, they dove together into the sea, reached it with a few brisk strokes, scrambled aboard, steered it past the rock, and then lost no time in toweling and dressing their nakedness and preparing hot drink. Soon they were looking at each other over steaming mugs of grog.

"Now that we've changed oceans," Fafhrd said, "we'll raise No-ombrulsk in a day with this west wind."

The Mouser nodded and then smiled steadily at his comrade for a space. Finally he said, "Well, old friend, are you sure that is all you have to say?"

Fafhrd frowned. "Well, there's one thing," he replied somewhat uncomfortably after a bit. "Tell me, Mouser, did

your girl ever take off her mask?"

"Did yours?" the Mouser asked back, eyeing him quizzically.

Fafhrd frowned. "Well, more to the point," he said gruffly, "did any of it really happen? We lost our swords and duds but we have nothing to show for it."

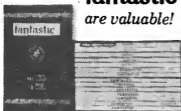
The Mouser grinned and took the black cigar from the corner of his mouth and handed it to Fafhrd.

"This is what I went back for," he said, sipping his grog. "I thought we needed it to get our ship back, and perhaps we did."

It was a tiny replica, carved in jet with the Mouser's teeth marks deeply indenting it near the stern, of the *Black Treasurer*.

**THE END**

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# WORLD WITHOUT ANNETTE

By J. T. McINTOSH

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

*There were plenty of Annettes — fat ones, thin ones, virginal ones, sexy ones. All kinds except the one he wanted.*

TONY was too nice a guy to be in our line of business. On the other hand, he had such natural talent for figuring and organization that it would have been a shame to waste it on anything legal. He was so good that he was the boss.

I don't want to give you the idea we were all crooks. Our business was fully seventy per cent straight, maybe seventy-five, sometimes. Tony used to say crooked guys were guys who just had to be crooked even when it would've paid them to be straight. By that reckoning, none of us were crooked. If there was one thing we were all good at, it was looking after our own interests, even if that meant doing things the legal way.

Exactly what our line of

business was, I'd be a fool to tell you—and I'm no fool.

Anyway, we were all doing fine until Tony met Annette.

I went to church the other day with Mamie, which only goes to show that truth is stranger than fiction. I mean, Mamie and me in church. Anyway, the preacher took as his theme the popular song *After you get what you want you don't want it*. I know that's going back a few years, but you've got to give preachers a year or two to catch up. He went on to say that you never knew when you had it good until you stopped having it good, and that's such a great truth that now I see why people go to church, and maybe one day Mamie and I will go again.

Before Tony met Annette



They flipped a switch and whot came from the fourth dimension looked pretty three dimensional.

we were certainly having it good, but we didn't know that until Tony met Annette. Afterwards we were still doing all right, although we didn't think so, until science entered our lives. And even then... what I mean is, things kept getting worse and worse, only each time we moaned about how bad things were and didn't realize that pretty soon we'd be glad to settle for the way things were there and then.

To go back to the beginning—Tony Mantell was tall and had white teeth, broad shoulders and narrow hips, and it was surprising how little attention he paid to women and vice versa until Annette came along.

Annette came from Shehanta, a little place in Michigan that didn't even have one horse, and she'd been raised there by doting, respectable parents who always expected her to be home by eleven o'clock. Her experience of life when she came to Chicago could have been written on the back of a one-cent stamp. The first time I saw her in a low-cut dress she kept trying to pull it up and looked as if she'd borrowed not only the dress from an older, less innocent friend, but also the

swelling high breasts to go with it. On the face of it, it should have been one of those great human tragedies you're always hearing about when she met Tony, even allowing for the fact that Tony is a nice guy.

Well, I wasn't around when they were holding hands, naturally, but it seems it was Tony who wanted to put Annette on a pedestal and protect her virtue and never let her good name get tarnished. And it seems it was Annette who didn't want him to go home and excited him the way nice girls who don't know any better do, and then cry and try to draw back, only Annette didn't cry and didn't try to draw back, and Tony didn't go home.

That doesn't mean that she was any different from what she seemed to be. If you know anything about women and anything about men you probably learned a long time ago that when a guy really falls for a girl he knocks himself out believing she's an angel and setting a standard of purity for her that only a saint could live up to—and only on Sundays at that. But when a girl goes for a guy, everything she ever learned gets thrown out of the window, especially all her mother ever told her.

Annette moved in with us, and if you think that meant she'd changed, you're so wrong. She'd say: "But isn't that dishonest, Tony?" and Tony would say: "Sure, it's dishonest." Then she'd say: "I wish you wouldn't do it, Tony." And Tony would say: "Not if you don't want me to, baby."

You can imagine what this was doing to the Mantell mob.

"Jeez," Art said to me, "I don't wish that dame any harm, but if she stepped in front of a truck I wouldn't lose any sleep at all."

"That's no way to talk," I said reproachfully. "A nice girl like that."

"I said I got nothing against the dame. Mack, how about you and me giving her a little help to fall in front of a truck?"

I considered. "Tony wouldn't like it," I said finally, regretfully.

"I wasn't fixin' to tell Tony."

"Tony usually finds things out."

Art sighed, all 265 pounds of him rising and falling. "I guess you're right, Mack," he said. "But I sure wish she'd go back to Shehanta, Mich."

Being Tony's right-hand man, I didn't want to double-cross him, and I figured it

would be doublecrossing him if I fixed a slight accident for Annette. But that didn't mean I didn't sympathize with Art's point of view. A few more weeks of this and Annette would have us all singing in the church choir and collecting money for the poor. A week or two more and we'd be the poor.

Annette was hard to figure. She was living right there at the apartment with Tony in the openest way. Tony was crazy to marry her, but she wouldn't marry him until some of the things she didn't like about him were cleared up. And Tony was falling over himself trying to get these things cleared up so that she'd go to the altar with him.

She was a lovely kid, sure. She had honey-gold hair and the kind of figure you wouldn't expect a respectable girl to have and still be respectable. For a while I wondered how a girl like Annette had managed to stay like Annette, and then I figured it was because if you tried to talk this kid into anything you'd be liable to end up weeping and confessing all your sins.

But what I couldn't figure at first was the things she'd apparently put up with, in-

stead of denouncing them as evil the way you'd expect her to. It was a long time before I realized she had a lot of patience and knew that if you started criticising people before you even knew them, you never get to first base.

Instead she'd be nice to us, so that we'd want to please her, and knowing the kind of things that would please her we started by moderating our language and ended up reluctant to do anything bad in case she heard about it.

So she was undermining us all slowly and gradually, not just Tony. There was no telling where it was going to end, but the sooner it did end the better. Knowing Tony wouldn't walk out on Annette, and that Annette was even less likely to walk out on Tony, all we could hope for was that something painless but final should somehow happen to Annette.

One day the phone rang. Art picked it up. "Huh? You don't say! I'll tell him."

He looked round. "Guy by the name of Brian Gregson wants to talk to you, Boss. Says he's an old college friend of yours."

Sam, Ed and Joe, playing poker in one corner, suspended operations in amazement

at hearing that Tony once went to college.

Tony touched Annette's shoulder in passing, just to make sure she was really there. She was sewing on a button for Sam.

We weren't listening, not exactly, and it was only gradually that we stopped what we were doing and stared at Tony. One of the things that caught our attention was this:

"Well, look, Brian, I never lend money. I just don't believe in it. But I'll *give* you five hundred if you like."

Art groaned audibly. Annette didn't look up, but I could see she approved. Art was staring at her, his jaw hanging like an empty sock. Here was Tony giving away five Cs which could have been hers, and she admired him for it and thought he was doing the right thing. No wonder Art couldn't figure it.

Tony was grinning. "Seems as if it's deadlock, then," he said. "You won't accept a gift and I won't lend you money. Sell it to me? Hell, Brian, why would I buy the fourth dimension?"

We all jumped, and the poker game froze in the middle of a jackpot.

"Yes, I know it isn't time travel," Tony said. "I know you're talking about parallel

worlds. I still don't want to buy the first serial rights in a couple of thousand parallel worlds . . . Sure I believe you, Brian. All I'm saying is, suppose it does work, what good is it going to be to me? . . . Oh, I get it. You want to sell me the whole thing so you won't be accepting a gift. Well, if that's the way you want it, okay. How about lunching with me tomorrow to fix up the details? Yes, call me at eleven."

He hung up.

"The fourth dimension yet," I said.

Tony grinned. "Don't lose any sleep over it, Mack, I'm sure not going to."

"Who was that nut? Does he really expect you to believe that crap?"

"I do believe it," Tony said. "Brian Gregson may be crazy, but his is the kind of madness that's close to genius. If he says he's got a thing, he's got it. If he says he's going to get a thing, he's going to get it."

"You mean this fourth dimension business is on the up and up?"

"Not yet," said Tony patiently. "It may need a lot of work yet. But that's Brian's worry, not mine. I'm giving him some backing, that's all. I'm not going to work with

him on it, the way he wants me to."

"You work with him? You?"

"Boys, it may be a shock to you, but we've been making out the way we have because I've been applying the laws of mathematics to our business. I graduated *summa cum laude* in mathematics. Brian needs money and he needs a mathematician. He can have the money, but I'm not going to work with him."

He waved his hand casually, dismissing Brian Gregson and an infinity of parallel worlds. "Baby," he said to Annette, "how about dinner at Hill's?"

Tony was like that. You could sell him Brooklyn Bridge only if he particularly wanted Brooklyn Bridge. If he didn't, he'd keep his dollar and a half, even if he thought he could sell the bridge again for maybe five dollars next week.

If he decided to take a thing up, he'd take it up. If he decided to leave it alone, he'd not only leave it alone—if it turned out later that somebody else made a fortune out of it, Tony just wouldn't give a damn.

I stayed in the car outside Hill's listening to the radio.

Tony and Annette walked on the inside, with Sam and Art practically hiding them. This was just routine.

They only had about thirty yards to go. Hill's neon-lit entrance glared green and pink and white along the street.

Tony said something, and Annette looked up at him and laughed. She was wearing a short silver dress, and she looked like the fairy on top of the cake.

I saw the whole thing. I saw a black car pull away from the side of the street beyond the club and I stabbed the horn ring savagely. The ignition wasn't on and nothing happened. I went for my gun, but before I could get the window open there was a stutter of shots.

Tony, Sam and Art threw themselves flat, and before they hit the ground Sam and Art were firing at the big black car. I had the window open by this time and was shooting too. The black car lurched, climbed the curb, almost righted itself and then crashed into a stairway.

It was the Arnold mob. One of the men in the car tried to make a break for it, and Sam shot him in the leg. The car burst into flames, and nobody else got out. Through one of the windows I could see some-

thing black writhing like rubber thrown on a fire.

Two cops appeared, and the guy who was shot in the leg fired at them. Art kicked the gun out of his hand, thus proving we were solid citizens ready to defend any cop to the death.

When I realized Tony wasn't paying any attention to all this, I ran to him. He was bending over Annette, saying her name over and over.

I looked over Tony's shoulder. One glance was enough. A cloud of bullets had torn Annette to pieces.

I tried to help Tony up, but he shook my hand off. He was covered in blood, all of it Annette's. I saw his face and stepped back, startled.

Tony was crying like a baby.

Although we were sorry for Tony, none of us was anything like heartbroken. Sure, Annette was a nice kid. But it had been a quick and clean exit for her, and we were honest enough to admit that things couldn't have turned out better if we'd fixed the whole thing ourselves.

With Annette gone, the Arnold mob finished, and us in the clear after the shooting, I expected we'd soon be mak-

ing more money than the U. S. Treasury.

But it didn't work out like that.

When I told Tony that Arnold, knowing the gaff was blown, had obligingly blown his brains out, just to clear the pitch properly for us, he had me repeat it three times and after that, failing to get it, gave it up.

Then I began to guess we were really in trouble. For the first time I suspected that no matter how bad we'd thought things were with Annette around trying to reform Tony, they could be worse—much worse.

I knew better than anybody else, better even than Tony, who the boss of the outfit was. Without Tony we wouldn't last a month. Everything came from Tony—ideas, know-how, plans, counter-plans, enthusiasm, co-ordination.

For a week Tony did nothing but stare into space. We had to feed him, make him go to bed, wake him up.

And then suddenly Tony asked me what happened about Brian Gregson.

"Well, it was the day after Annette was killed," I said. "I didn't want to bother you. I said you'd call him back."

"Go and get him, Mack."

I stared at him.

"Go and get Brian Gregson. Right away."

I didn't go myself, I sent Sam and Ed. This was the first time Tony had shown any interest in anything since what ~~was~~ left of Annette was buried, and I wanted to stay around and keep an eye on him.

We weren't surprised that we missed Annette, all of us, and Tony a thousand times more than anybody else. What we hadn't known was that it was too late for the removal of Annette to leave Tony the way he'd been before she showed up.

Now that I knew what a mistake I'd made thinking things would be better without Annette around, I'd have gone out and rounded up a dozen well stacked chicks for Tony to look over if I thought it would do any good. But it had taken him more than thirty years to find one Annette, and I couldn't see him finding another in five minutes.

When the boys had gone, Tony said: "Did I ever tell you about Brian Gregson, Mack?"

"No, Boss."

He wasn't looking at me. He was feverish, his eyes darting about and never rest-

ing on anything. He kept fiddling with his left thumb, as though he had an idea there was a way to unhook it and he was trying to find it. I knew he wasn't really talking to me at all, but to himself.

"He was withdrawn—fannatic," Tony said. "Though I knew him only slightly at college I knew him better than anyone else did. He had wild ideas, and he talked about them angrily, defiantly, sarcastically, because people in authority always regarded them as wild ideas, and Brian had come to take futility for granted."

I'd never heard Tony talk like that before. Although he didn't look down on us, being quite without conceit, I guess he'd always assumed that we were only receptive to fairly simple ideas, like when you take a hundred dollars from a guy, it's best if it's legal or if he doesn't see your face. I wondered if maybe Annette had been able to talk to him the way we couldn't.

"Brian and I had nothing in common," Tony went on, "but I guess he liked me more than anybody else, because whatever he said I'd listen to what came next. You know, those scientists, professors and students that are supposed to be on the lookout for new ideas

often have the most closed minds . . . Brian would say: 'If the moon is made of green cheese' and everybody would interrupt: 'But the moon isn't made of green cheese,' and that would be that. Me, I would at least listen."

I listened too. Tony was still talking when Sam and Ed came back with Brian Gregson.

Gregson was a thin guy with a long nose and practically no hair left, although he was no older than Tony. At sight of Tony, he exploded with relief and resentment.

"Tony Mantell! Well, there was no need to send two men with guns for me. You could have—"

"Sorry, Brian," Tony said. "Seems the boys misunderstood."

"You should of told us he was a friend of yours, Boss," Sam said reprovingly. "We would have pointed the rods at the floor."

"I've never been treated like this in my life," Gregson raged, working himself into a real frenzy. "These hoodlums burst in and—"

"There's no call to be nasty, Mister Gregson," said Sam, hurt. "Nobody calls us hoods. And we treated you so gentle."

"Forget it, Brian," said Tony. Clearly he had forgotten it already. "Why I got you here was this . . ."

Maybe I should have known what was coming. I'd been with Tony long enough to have some idea how his mind worked.

But the thing about originality is that you can't either copy it or predict it, and Tony had an original mind. Time and again, planning various jobs, he'd thought of things that other people just wouldn't think about. At first we'd thought they were crazy, and sometimes they were. Other times, however, by rejecting the fifty obvious but impossible ways, Tony was able to come up with the one crazy but possible way.

"I loved a girl, Annette Smith," Tony said. "You won't understand that, Brian, because you never loved anybody. Maybe if I tell you I loved Annette as you love a line of research you'll see what I mean. Annette's dead. But in a lot of other worlds, Annette must still be alive. I want you to find one of those worlds, Brian, and bring Annette here."

Gregson stuttered: "You can't . . . I can't . . . there isn't . . . it isn't . . ."

"Listen, Brian," said Tony. "All I care about is getting Annette back. Nothing else in the world matters to me."

Sam looked at me and groaned.

"If you hadn't phoned me," Tony went on, "there wouldn't have been any way. I'd just have had to learn to do without Annette. As it is—"

"But Tony," Gregson said shrilly, "I'm only working on theories. I'm trying to prove the existence of parallel worlds. It may be a hundred years before it becomes possible to find out anything definite about any worlds but this one. It may never be possible."

"We'll find out if it's possible."

"But . . ."

We could have told Gregson it wasn't any use arguing. Tony was never stubborn, exactly. If he had made up his mind to do something, he followed the most promising line until it was quite clear it wasn't going to work. Then he tried another. If all the possible ways failed he'd give up, but only then. And it was amazing how often what we'd have sworn was impossible turned out to be possible after all.

"You don't need to worry about that, Brian," Tony said

mildly. "You wanted me to buy your process, didn't you? You wanted me to help you with the math, didn't you? Okay, I'll buy it. I'll help you to work on this thing, and subsidize you while you work. What more do you want?"

"This scheme of yours isn't . . . won't . . ."

"What's that to you? You're getting what you want."

In the next few weeks the boys drifted away one by one. They were all apologetic about it, but they weren't much good with test-tubes or electric meters or logarithms. Art said both his wives were ill. Sam said if we wanted him we'd find him at the nearest racetrack where anything was happening. Ed said he hadn't seen a gun fired in so long he'd jump out of his skin if he had to shoot somebody. Joe merely looked at me and shook his head.

They all left addresses in case Tony should ever rejoin the human race.

I stuck around because . . . well . . .

I stuck around.

It seemed that Gregson had proved the existence of parallel worlds because there were some things in physics that couldn't be explained except

by Gregson's theories, and according to a thing called Occam's Razor that meant the theories were right. Anyway, Gregson said he'd proved it and Tony was satisfied.

This Gregson was a nut by any reckoning, and it was easy to see why he hadn't any friends. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink, he had no sense of humor, and as for the other thing . . .

Mamie Zarchey, a girl whose existence Tony had sometimes noticed before Annette came along, tried to move in on us one night, thinking that Annette's death left the way clear for her. Tony gave her a drink and went on talking to Gregson. Pretty soon she managed to spill her drink on her dress, and nothing would do but Tony had to give her a dressing gown so she could dry her dress. Well, when she came back she was wearing the dressing gown kind of careless, in fact wide open from throat to ankles, and all she was wearing was a pair of shoes.

Tony got rid of her as quickly and as firmly as he could, but the point was, afterwards it turned out that Gregson hadn't even noticed.

However, it seemed that in his own line Gregson knew all

the angles, and he and Tony worked sixteen hours a day together. Pretty soon a couple of technicians moved in to help.

Tony surprised me. I had always known he was pretty hot on mathematics, but the way he worked with Gregson and those technicians was an eyeopener. Personally, I think he was the real boss, just as he had been of the outfit that had broken up. Although Gregson used to argue with him and swear at him, I got the idea that Gregson and a whole army of technicians couldn't have made half the progress in twice the time that they did under Tony.

Soon they were quite sure that these other worlds existed and were even able to find out a little about some of them. Near as I could make out, there was an infinity of matter, space and time co-existing in the cosmos, and the thing that made sense of it all was time. Time rolled on, claiming these worlds and these universes as it needed them, making a continuous, unchangeable line that we call history.

But there's more than one time, it seems. More than one continuous line. Together but not touching are what you might call the green time-line,

the black line, the blue, green, yellow, red, orange, violet. All together, diverging, crossing, re-crossing. Only instead of eight there are eighty, eighty million, any number you care to think about.

Nearest in time-space are the only slightly diverging worlds, the worlds so alike that you could search for years and not find any difference whatever.

These were the worlds in which there was a Tony and a Gregson and a Mack and a New York and an America and the same languages in the same countries.

Further away are the worlds in which Hitler won the war, in which the Titanic didn't sink, in which England and France are the same country.

Still further away are the time-space lines in which Earth has a methane atmosphere, in which there never was an Earth, in which there never was a Sol. But these set-ups are not merely in a different time-space, they're far away in *space*.

All Tony was concerned about were the worlds which were still practically duplicates of ours.

Weeks passed, and I waited hopefully for some sign that

Tony was getting over his obsession with Annette. There wasn't any.

Sam went to jail for being around when a racetrack swindle was going on. Ed got shot in the stomach, and after that he walked sort of sideways. Art settled down to rear pigs, a natural for a guy who knew so much about putting on weight. I never did hear what happened to Joe.

By this time Gregson was able to list worlds on a scale which was an index of their difference from Earth I. (We called ourselves Earth I just as early scientists assumed that everything revolved round the Earth). And even at this stage he found something that puzzled him and Tony a lot.

The other worlds differed from each other only in the twentieth decimal place, so to speak. Earth II, III and IV were so similar to each other that it was hard to be sure there was any difference at all.

But Earth II was quite a lot different from Earth I. This added to their problems.

Tony's obsession with the idea of replacing Annette from one of the other Earths had such a hold on him that I had to get an idea. I mean

me, not Tony, which was unusual.

I took Tony aside one day and said: "Look, Boss. Suppose this thing works."

"It's going to work," said Tony firmly.

"Okay, suppose it works. Any kid knows that the really tough part of any heist, big or small, is the getaway. And the next toughest part is staying under cover once you're under cover. And the next is converting the loot into something you can spend at the corner drugstore."

Tony nodded. "So?"

"Anybody could steal anything from anywhere if he knew that once he had it in his hands the job was over. Suppose we hopped over into Earth II and lifted the English Crown Jewels. Naturally, in Earth II they'd never be found. And if there were any awkward questions in Earth I, *here*, all that would happen is that the English Crown Jewels would be checked to make sure they were still there. It's flawless, Boss."

"It's a nice idea, Mack," said Tony, "and I congratulate you."

"Thanks, Boss."

"But there's two things to consider. First of all, in every world similar to this one, there's a Brian Gregson and

he's working on the same thing. So even if he hasn't got as far with it as *our* Brian has, he'd know exactly what had happened."

"Well, who'd believe him?" I demanded.

Tony shook his head. "Anyway, there's the second thing. It wouldn't be right, Mack."

He left me to chew on that.

When Tony said a thing would work, he generally knew what he was talking about. It's a funny thing—when you've got a magic touch like Tony has, you don't have to know a business inside out to be able to say this line is going to pay off and that line isn't.

I hadn't been paying much attention to the project, having other things on my mind. Well, even if Tony didn't want Mamie there was no need for her to sit around alone all day and all night, was there?

So it was a complete surprise to me when I came in at 2 a.m. one morning and found the work was suddenly finished. In other words, they really thought there was a chance of producing another Annette from thin air. More specifically, from Earth II.

"Quiet," Gregson snarled at me, though I hadn't said a word.

The technicians weren't there, only Gregson and Tony. And now me.

In Tony's bedroom they had an adjustable operating-table with two big shiny frying pans that looked like photographers' floods at head and foot. Tony and Gregson were pushing this and the furniture around, with Gregson constantly checking a control unit at the back of one of the frying pans.

"I think she's here," he said at last. "Two feet lower."

They wound the table down. Tony was trying to unscrew his thumb again.

"She's in bed?" he asked.

"I guess so. She isn't moving much. Good thing, too. Makes it easier."

I felt a tingle at the back of my neck. Somehow I had a feeling that something might come of this—maybe not what any of us expected, but something.

Gregson switched on and a faint blue light began to play between the two lamps. Gradually it built up.

"It either works or it doesn't," said Gregson sourly, and closed another switch.

There was a flicker like the quickest of electronic flashes. And on the table, sound asleep, wearing white shortie pajamas, was Annette.

We all shouted at once, and she opened her eyes. She wasn't puzzled at first, not till she saw Gregson, and then felt the hard table she was on, and groped for sheets that weren't there.

I never had such a shock in my life, not even when Winin' Boy lost at 20-1 on. Sure, I'd known what Tony was trying to do, and half believed he could do it if he said he could do it. And this was what was supposed to happen.

The real shock was something different, something you couldn't argue with. I'd seen Annette torn to pieces by a hail of steel. I'd seen her afterwards with her top half turned inside-out. Nobody had ever been more dead than Annette was, and nothing had been more certain than that I'd never see Annette again living and breathing and moving.

And here was Annette living and breathing and moving. Not a twin, but Annette.

At sight of Gregson she reached automatically for a wrap that wasn't there, although she'd looked at Tony and me without being bothered by any such consideration.

"Tony—Mack," she said. "Did I faint or something?"

Tony took her in his arms tenderly. "No, honey," he said soothingly. "I'll tell you all about it—during the next fifty years."

"But you're dressed. What did you get up for? Who's this? Why have you shifted everything around?"

"Brian," said Tony over his shoulder. "And Mack. There's a lot to talk about—later. Meantime, I guess you both want some sleep."

So we left them. Gregson was triumphant, elated, and he wanted to boast about his success, his cleverness. But there was only me, so he grunted and went to his own room.

I certainly didn't expect to be called into session again with Tony and Annette that night, but about a half-hour later, when I was thinking of going to bed, Tony came for me.

"I've been trying to explain things to Annette," he said. "She thinks I'm drunk or something. Come and talk to her, Mack."

He was walking on air, naturally enough. Annette's incredulity didn't bother him at all. Whether she believed the truth or not didn't matter a damn.

All that mattered was that she was here.

When we went back into the bedroom, Annette, still in her pajamas, was looking in the cupboard where all her clothes still were.

"Nothing I've bought in the last three months is here," she said thoughtfully. "Just the things I had before that."

"Of course, honey," said Tony. "Like I was just telling you—"

"Funny, I don't see the short silver evening dress," she said. "I've had it more than three months. It should be here."

Tony and I looked at each other, and for a moment I saw pain again in his eyes, the agony that had never left them that first week after Annette was killed.

She'd been wearing the silver frock when she was shot.

When I saw that, I realized that although Tony was glad to have Annette back, it didn't really affect the horror of that night for him. This was another Annette, an Annette he was prepared to love.

But she wasn't *his* Annette.

She took out a wrap and put it on. "Now, Mack," she said. "You tell me what's been going on."

I told her. I rambled a bit, and most of what I was trying

to explain I didn't really understand. But she didn't interrupt, and she more than half believed what I was telling her even before I started.

After all, when you suddenly find everybody has green skin, it's not very constructive to say: "I must be nuts," and shoot yourself. It's more sensible just to believe that everybody has green skin.

At last she nodded. "I see," she said.

Tony moved to take her in his arms. "Now you know I'm not drunk, honey—" he began, but Annette cut in.

"No, Tony." Her head came up as if she had made a decision. "Send me back, please."

"Huh?"

My jaw dropped too, and it didn't matter to me the way it did to Tony.

"You should have known it was no good," she said gently. "I'm sorry for you, Tony. I know you loved me—the other me, the one that was killed. But don't you see, my loyalty is to *my* Tony. How could I live here, knowing how *my* Tony felt?"

"I won't let you go back," Tony said through clenched teeth. "I'll smash the machines."

"It won't do you any good," said Annette in the same

gentle tone. "You're no more to me than Mack is."

"I will be. Tomorrow you'll feel different."

"Don't you understand? If you don't send me back, I'll never see you, never speak to you. I'll go back to Shehanta. I said I was sorry for you, but I don't love you and I never could love you."

In one movement he was at her side and she was half hidden in his grasp. "Mack, get out," he said over his shoulder. "Annette, I'm going to—"

"Mack, stay where you are," Annette said, struggling. "Mr. Mantell, please let me go."

That "Mr. Mantell" did it. Tony released her, staring down at her.

"I don't know you," she said. "You look like Tony, but you're not. I think I knew it even before I had any idea what had happened. Even if you'd pretended nothing had happened, I'd have known."

"You couldn't have."

"Yes, I could."

"But I'm the same as your Tony. More alike than a twin. If I hadn't told you, you couldn't possibly ever have known."

"You're *not* the same. For one thing, I've had three months more with him than

you had with your Annette."

She brought up her left hand, and for the first time we saw the wedding ring on her finger.

Although I couldn't see Tony's face, I saw his shoulders slump and knew he was accepting defeat.

She meant what she was saying. And she was right, those three months mattered, mattered a lot. If Tony had been able to bring her through from Earth II three months ago, she might never have known anything had happened. But those three months without Annette had changed Tony, and Annette's three months more with her Tony had changed her, too.

It was no use holding her against her will. She wasn't going to break down, and nobody knew that better than Tony.

Although she remained sorry for him, she wanted to go back to the man she loved.

She went back.

After Annette had returned to her own world, Gregson did some checking on his own and told Tony he'd better give up the idea of bringing another Annette from a different world.

Apparently why the other worlds differed from ours was

because only in this one had Annette alone been killed, and consequently it was only in Earth I that intensive research on parallel worlds was going on. That was quite enough to cause a very significant difference in the index.

In the parallel worlds, *everything* doesn't happen. The impossible never happens in any of them. The nearly impossible happens once or twice, no more.

In Earth I, Tony slipped the instant before the shots reached him. This was a wild chance and Gregson didn't think it happened in any of the adjacent worlds. In all the others Tony was right beside Annette—and both of them were killed, or neither.

So only in Earth I was Tony left alive with Annette dead. Therefore it was only in Earth I that Tony got Gregson to work for him. And it was only when Tony and Gregson worked together that the experiments were successful.

As Gregson pointed out to Tony, every Annette would feel the same way.

Tony was frowning and working hard on his left thumb. "There must be a way," he said.

"Don't be a fool, Tony," said Gregson impatiently. "I've worked with you so far be-

cause it was an interesting experiment. But this obsession over a woman has gone far enough. It's time I published my results."

"Your results?" said Tony mildly. "Didn't you say yourself that it was only when you and I worked together that there *were* any results?"

"All right then, our results. It's time we published them."

Tony shook his head. "I don't think we should ever publish this."

"Why in heaven's name not?" said Gregson, beginning to get furious.

"Mack, you tell Brian your idea."

"What idea?" I asked, surprised to be brought into the discussion.

"How you wanted to use this business."

I told them. Gregson calmed down enough to listen.

"You see, Brian?" said Tony. "This discovery means chaos. Fifteen genuine Venus de Milos in one Earth, and none in fourteen others. America V fighting a war with America VIII. Illegal immigrants moving between different worlds. Chases through fifteen Earths after the gang that held up the First National Bank."

Gregson said nothing. Like many theorists, he hadn't seen

the practical applications of his discovery.

"Meantime," said Tony, "let's bring another Annette here."

"But it won't be any use."

"We'll see."

I didn't move as they went about their preparations, Gregson still protesting irritably. Like Gregson, I hadn't quite seen what things would be like if hopping between worlds became as common as taking a taxi. Now that I did, I began to feel uneasy.

Tony had seen it all along, yet he was still determined to find himself an Annette from somewhere. I got still more worried. There was no telling where this was going to end.

I was worried about Gregson, too.

We had always known he was a nut, all of us. Now I knew what kind of nut he was. Paranoia, they call it.

He wasn't interested in women, and that didn't mean what it usually means, either. Everything went into the job, which was fine as long as the job lasted.

Now, by Gregson's reckoning, the job was finished, and he wanted the world which had spurned him to have to eat its words and admit *Brian Gregson is a great man.*

Earlier he'd been so proud, so high-minded, that he wouldn't borrow money from Tony, he wanted to sell him his work. Tony had gone along with this, partly because it was what Gregson wanted, and partly, I guess, because this way Tony could be quite sure he could control the whole business and use it the way he wanted to. Or not use it if he didn't want to.

All along Tony hadn't cared about fame, money, or scientific knowledge. All he had cared about was Annette and a way to bring her back.

But now Gregson wanted what he felt was his. He had forgotten it had been his idea to sell his work to Tony. He had forgotten, or soon would forget, that although he had started the job it had needed Tony to finish it.

He was angry, and justly angry, he believed.

That was why it was paranoia. I looked it up. People like that are always right and everybody else is wrong. And they go to the most amazing lengths to prove it.

I was worried about a lot of things, and I didn't even know what to worry about most.

Tony got his way. There had been only one experiment,

after all. Gregson put his grievances aside for a while.

Once more the preparations were made, again at night. Once more the switch was clicked. Once more a girl appeared from nowhere, and at first we noticed nothing but the fact that she was completely nude.

But the next thing we noticed was far more important. She wasn't Annette at all.

Or was she? She was younger, her hair was red-gold instead of honey-gold, she was slimmer, taller—and yet, she could be Annette, from a different world. She lay there sleeping, for this time none of us had shouted.

The seconds stretched themselves out, none of us wanting to be the first to speak. And it was the girl who spoke first. She shivered slightly, opened her eyes, took us all in, sat up and said:

"Be my guest."

"Annette . . ." Tony said doubtfully.

Her nakedness didn't bother her at all. With a figure like hers, it needn't. Yet the way she looked at us was so utterly unlike Annette's way that it was no surprise when she said:

"Hell, no. I've got a sister Annette. Now who's going to tell me what's going on? And

who's going to throw me a wrap?"

"It doesn't seem to bother you much," Tony said.

She posed professionally, elbows above her head, long legs crossed, torso stretching provocatively. Her waist was slim as a sapling and nearly as firm, and though we could count her ribs her breasts were big and so firm they scarcely quivered as she moved.

What she said was no surprise. "You should know, Tony, I was a stripper when you married me."

She stood up and unhurriedly found herself a wrap.

"I never knew Annette had a sister," Tony said, puzzled.

She pulled the belt tight. Her figure was Annette's, exaggerated. Fuller bust and hips, smaller waist, longer legs. I wouldn't say she was better looking than Annette, but she would attract more attention anywhere, and deserve it.

"If you knew Annette and not me, you wouldn't hear she had a sister," the girl said. "While Annette was in Sunday school, little Diana was in the woods, teaching the other kids about the birds and the bees. Where else would Diana be but in the woods? Oh, An-

nette's all right. She likes me well enough. But she doesn't exactly boast about the connection. Now will you kindly tell me—"

"Just a minute," said Tony, suddenly excited. "You're Diana, Annette's sister, and you met Tony Mantell? Where's Annette?"

"In Michigan."

"She never left Michigan?"

"Of course she's left Michigan. Why, she's even been as far from home as Canada. Slept in somebody else's bed too. Naturally, since it was Annette, he wasn't in it at the time."

"But I mean—she never met Tony? *You're* married to Tony?"

"You being Tony's twin, I presume?"

"Well—yes. Put it that way if you like. Diana, is Annette married?"

"Not when last heard of. Who would be good enough?"

Tony spun round to Gregson. "That's it, Brian. You see? In Diana's world, Tony never met Annette, he met Diana instead. Not having met Annette, he was happy with Diana. So all we've got to do is—"

"Are you crazy, Tony's twin?" Diana demanded. "You think Tony and Annette

would get on? Look, did you ever hear of Jeckyll and Hyde? That's Annette and me. I was sent home from school at thirteen and ran away with a jazz trumpeter at fifteen. I was a fan dancer at eighteen. I'm only nineteen now, but I'll think of something. Now look, when Tony and I met, we clicked. Hell, you're not going to tell me Tony and Annette . . . hell, you're crazy."

Tony was hardly listening to her. He was wild with excitement. "No need to try to convince Diana," he said. "Send her back. Then we'll find Annette—the Annette in Diana's world."

Diana sat on the table, pulled the wrap off her right leg and extended it in front of her. It was quite a leg.

"Huh?" said Tony.

"Just making things easy for you. You're pulling my leg, aren't you? You're Tony. That's Mack. I don't know who that is, and I don't particularly care. So there's a big laugh coming up. Okay, I'll play along. But don't keep me in suspense forever."

Tony grinned. "You're wrong, Diana. In more than one way. The same guy could get along fine with you—and with Annette."

"Just don't try it. Before I

met you, Tony, you weren't the only man I'd had breakfast with, and I never expected you to be entirely without experience either. But now . . . if you start making a play for Annette, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"You don't have to think what you'll do, Diana," Tony said. "We're sending you back to Tony. Your Tony. Just lie back there."

She shrugged. "Okay. If we get to the big laugh quicker that way."

"You can keep the wrap," Tony said.

"Thanks very much. It's mine anyway."

"No, it's not. If you care to try it out, you'll find it fits Annette better than you."

She couldn't answer that. She was gone.

We had to load everything and take it to Shehanta, Mich. That's where Annette was, in Diana's world.

Tony was as happy as a sandboy, whatever a sandboy is. But Gregson and I didn't exactly shout with glee.

I was still anxious about things in general, and the Gregson-Mantell Inter-Time-Space Commuter in particular. In fact, for the first time in my life I began to consider going one hundred per cent straight.

It was only when I found myself viewing with a distinct lack of enthusiasm the kind of chaotic anarchy which was sure to result from a general release of the GMTSC that I realized, also for the first time in my life, that crooks big and small mess up society as much as they can, at the same time relying on society to keep itself in as good shape as possible.

On the whole, I liked a well-ordered world. I didn't want to live in a world where the bank in which I kept my pennies might go bust at any moment, because the Mack in Earth LVI, and his pals, had just got away with \$30,000,000,000,000 from Earth I. I didn't want to be shot by some guy from Earth XI who wanted my Mamie Zarchey and didn't want me chasing after him to get her back. I didn't want to go to bed nights knowing that even if I locked all the doors somebody could materialize in the room at any moment, or whisk me away to a world in which Earth was being invaded by seven-foot spiders. No, none of this appealed to me.

I just wanted to live in an Earth I that never had any truck with Earths II through CCC.

Hell, if this thing got

around there wouldn't be any law and order anywhere.

When I told Tony how I felt, he laughed till he couldn't stand. Well, maybe what I said sounded kind of funny, coming from me.

"Mack," he said when he sobered a little, "I'm going to do my best to suppress this thing if I can, once I've brought Annette through. I'm glad I can count on your support. But it's not going to be easy. Think anybody could have suppressed the atom bomb?"

We took a truck with all the gear in it. All of us drove, Gregson too when it was his turn. But he didn't say a word all the way, and I thought: Probably Gregson rates as an honest man, and Tony and I certainly don't. But Tony and I can be trusted with a thing like this, and Gregson can't.

Tony was going to have quite a job suppressing Gregson. It occurred to me that any plans Gregson might have would be greatly simplified if, just for instance, Tony was shoved off into World III.

When I remembered how I'd wished that something quick and fatal would happen to Annette, I cursed myself to sleep at night.

Anyway, we arrived in

Shehanta, Mich., quite a nice little place, exactly the kind of small town you'd expect Annette to come from.

Tony sent me to look over the Smiths' house. They had heard of Tony, of course, as Annette's fiancé. And he had written to them when she was killed. So he thought it was better for me to look things over first.

It was going to be difficult to arrange things. When your daughter is killed and her body is sent home for burial, you don't exactly expect her to walk in three months later, alive and well. Tony said the best thing would be to bring Annette from Earth IX first, and gradually prepare her family for the miracle of having her restored to life. When I asked what we were going to do about the body in the local necropolis with a headstone that said Annette Smith, he said we'd face that problem later.

There were a hell of a lot of problems we were going to have to face later, I thought as I walked north from the Square, which had six sides, to take a look at 249 Cedar Creek Boulevard, where Annette had been born.

I saw the house, and the Smiths, but that wasn't important. When I got back to

Shehanta's one hotel I found that Tony had been taken to the hospital with a broken leg and hip, and Gregson, the truck, and all the equipment were gone.

"He tried to kill me," said Tony incredulously. "I was giving him directions to back the truck in, and he drove right at me. Came back to finish me as I was lying on the ground, only I was between a lamppost and a tree, and he couldn't."

"I always knew he was a rat, Boss," I said. "I shouldn't have left you with him."

"But he was at college with me," said Tony, bewildered. People who had been at college with you couldn't drive trucks at you.

"What do you want me to do, Boss?"

"Go after him. I want that truck back. Without it, I can't bring Annette here. All the equipment's still in it."

Tony was in the hospital, and he was going to be there for a long time. But I hesitated about leaving him, for Gregson must know perfectly well that as long as Tony was alive he couldn't be safe. And Gregson was crazy.

"I don't dare set the cops on him," Tony said. "Not while he's got that truck. I

don't want anybody poking around in it. I've got to depend on you, Mack."

"Look, Boss, why is the truck so important?"

"Mack, Brian and I worked together and succeeded together. The two of us, together, could replace the machines in that truck. But neither of us separately can. I need the truck before I can even try to bring Annette from Earth IX. I don't care about Brian. All I want is the truck."

Privately, I thought the best thing that could happen would be Gregson driving the truck over a cliff. However, it was no good telling Tony that. To him the machines in the truck represented Annette. He still believed he was going to get Annette back, somehow. He was determined.

That was all the fourth dimension ever meant to him. Annette.

"Look, Tony," I said helplessly. "America is a big place. What chances have I got of finding Gregson?"

"Hold it," said Tony. A sister looked in and nodded to me that my time was up. "I think I know where he's gone. His mother left him an old farmhouse in Illinois, and I don't think he knows I know about it. He's almost sure to go there. Get a map and work

out the route Brian would take with the truck, and—"

"Your time is up," said the sister primly. "Mr. Mantell is a very sick man."

"Mack's just going," said Tony. He gave me a piece of paper. "Here's the address, Mack."

I was ushered out.

I should have known that Tony would never be caught with nothing up his sleeve. Sure, he'd had a leg and hip-bone broken, and was lucky to be alive.

But even though he hadn't expected Gregson's treachery, and I had, he still had a couple of things in reserve. One was the knowledge of the Illinois farmhouse. The other I didn't hear about until later.

It was typical of Tony. Time and again, on or after a job, something would happen that seemed disastrous to the rest of us. But time and again whatever happened would be something Tony had taken into account, not as a likelihood, but as a possibility. And there would be some safeguard.

Although Tony hadn't expected Gregson to drive the truck at him, he'd been aware of the possibility that Gregson might want to steal the truck. So while we were still in Chicago he'd found out discreetly

about the Illinois farmhouse.

I bought a Buick at Shehanta's used-car lot and made good time after the truck. Gregson had only a couple of hours' start on me, and the Buick could make thirty miles an hour more than the truck.

As I drove I was trying to figure how I stood. Sure, I was loyal to Tony. What he wanted I wanted. But the truck in front of me was carrying a load of trouble for everybody on this Earth, and perhaps on every other Earth too, and I couldn't help feeling more and more strongly that I had a duty not only to Tony but to the rest of mankind.

Imagine that, me not only feeling a sense of duty, but two at once.

I believed that only in Earth I had Gregson and Tony got together to work on the problem of inter-world communication, and maybe it was true that only those two men had the peculiar combination of talents needed to solve the problem. That meant that if the truck was completely destroyed with everything in it, including Gregson, there might be no more hopping between worlds, at any rate for a long time to come.

That, I thought, would be a very fine thing.

Some people say no murder

can ever be justified. Me, I don't have a troublesome conscience. If you want to know the truth, I never killed a man except in the Pacific, and at that time my country was moderately grateful to me for doing it. But I was quite prepared to kill Brian Gregson and live happily ever afterward with Mamie and maybe half a dozen kids.

Killing Brian Gregson and setting fire to the truck wouldn't worry me one little bit. The only thing that bothered me was Tony and how he'd feel about it.

I knew what he'd been like that first week after Annette died. Since then he'd been alive again, even happy, because he'd been working in the hope that he hadn't really lost Annette forever.

Tony trusted me to do what he told me—to save the truck. If I ran it off the road, overturned it and set fire to it, I was doublecrossing Tony just as badly as Gregson had doublecrossed him.

Whatever happened, I wasn't going to like doing it. I wanted to find Gregson and the truck, because I couldn't afford not to find it. But then what?

It was seven hundred miles to the farmhouse, and it took

me two days. Long before I got there I was pretty sure Gregson had taken some other way, if he was going there at all.

When I reached the place, there was no sign of Gregson. If that meant he wasn't coming there, things were bad. But if I'd merely missed him on the way, things couldn't have been better.

I had a chance to look the place over and be ready for him.

First I hid the Buick, not at the farmhouse but under some trees a mile on. The farmhouse was a ruin and wouldn't be worth ever putting in shape again. There was only one room which was reasonably watertight, and it had no floor.

When I saw the place I began to feel doubtful. Why should Gregson come to a place like this? He might as well drive the truck into a field.

I felt a little better when I put myself in his place. In a way he was a refugee. He didn't know that the police weren't looking for the truck. When you're on the run what you need more than anything is a base, even if it's a derelict farmhouse. You've got to get out of sight, under cover. And at the farmhouse he

could hide the truck in one of the ramshackle, tumbledown outhouses.

I went out to make sure I had left no tracks and looked around. In one respect the place was perfect for me. The farmhouse was on a hill, and the dirt road ran straight down to a rocky stream. If I pointed the truck the right way and released the brake, it would run down the hill and smash itself very convincingly. And if it didn't catch on fire I could always go down and give it some help.

Gregson could be in the driving - seat, unconscious, with nothing to show later except a bruise on the chin. And I didn't think a bruise on the chin would be very significant—later.

I had a long time to think.

Maybe by destroying the possibility of moving between worlds I'd be destroying this one. After all, we were all scared of an atom war that would leave the world a barren waste. Well, if that happened there would always be other worlds that hadn't had an atom war . . .

I shook my head at the thought. This thing seemed to have more possibilities on the debit side than on the credit side. We could hardly be

worse off if I could kill it forever; we could be a lot worse off if I couldn't.

No, I found I was still sure enough about that. It was only Tony I was worried about, Tony and the fact that he trusted me.

Days passed. I'd brought plenty to eat and drink with me. Even so, stocks were running low. But I couldn't afford to leave the farmhouse.

It would have been a great place for an ambush, for you could lie concealed there and nobody could get within a couple of miles of you without being seen. If Gregson did come during the day while I was waiting for him, he wouldn't have a chance. If he came at night it was just too bad. I had to sleep sometime.

It was nearly a week after Gregson tried to kill Tony that I saw the truck coming up the hill about eleven o'clock one morning.

By this time I knew exactly what I was going to do—up to a point. I was going to kill Brian Gregson. Whatever happened, there was no getting away from that. After I'd tapped him on the head and I could go ahead . . . well, I still wasn't entirely sure what I'd go ahead with.

I watched from behind a

dirty pane of glass that remained in one of the out-houses. The filth on it made it oneway glass—I could see what went on outside, but there wasn't the remotest chance that Gregson would see me inside.

Whatever he did, he didn't have much chance. I had a gun, and if I had to I'd shoot him. I didn't think I'd have to. Not knowing there was anyone around, he could hardly be careful enough to avoid giving me a chance to bop him on the head.

Then I'd have to make up my mind.

The truck turned off the dirt track and stopped in the yard. Gregson climbed down, leaving the motor running.

He didn't look crazy, any more than he'd ever done. He looked around him carefully, opening the various doors and looking inside. He even had the keys of the padlocks, which made it look as if he'd had his plans made before he left Chicago.

I didn't move, not yet. The longer he was here the less careful he'd be. When you put your head in what may be a trap, you don't expect it to close a couple of hours later.

He opened the biggest and best-preserved of the out-

houses and drove the truck inside. Then he came back and closed the doors—from the inside. He took the padlock in and the doors swung shut behind him.

I frowned, wondering what was going on. The shed he was in was nothing but an empty barn. There was no other exit. Why drive the truck in there and stay with it?

Perhaps he'd driven all through the night and needed sleep. The truck certainly provided more comfort than anything the farmhouse could provide.

Anyway, this didn't suit me at all. When you're holed up waiting for the enemy and the enemy appears and holes up too, you've lost your advantage, even if he doesn't know yet that you're there. If I approached the shed and tried to get in, I'd be giving Gregson a wonderful chance to drop me in my tracks.

I didn't want to watch two closed doors all day. I waited an hour. By that time I was pretty sure Gregson must be asleep. He couldn't be working. There was no light inside the truck, and the barn had no modern conveniences.

Cautiously I crept up to the shed, on the shadow side, and

found a crack. Gregson was in the truck: he certainly wasn't anywhere else.

If he was in the truck he couldn't be watching the walls of the shed and wouldn't see me passing the cracks. So I felt my way round, and as I expected, found a place where the wall was so rotted I could practically have walked right through it. I didn't do that, I cut it carefully with my knife, not making a sound.

I was in the barn, gun in hand. I crept to the back of the truck and opened one door a crack.

Then I spun round, gun ready.

Gregson wasn't in the truck. But he wasn't behind me either.

I might have spent a long time wondering about it if I hadn't heard the faint hum that told me the machine in the truck was working. Then the whole thing became clear in a flash.

Gregson had gone into another world.

It was suddenly obvious that that was what he would do. In another world, Tony wouldn't be his enemy or his friend, Tony would merely be someone he'd been at college with, someone who had half forgotten his existence. Gregson could do what he liked,

develop his machine again...

Anyway, this let me out. It was too late now to shoot Gregson on sight. I reached inside and shut the machine off.

Of course Gregson had had to leave it. If it was to move him into another world, he had to leave it in perfect order, actually running, in fact. He had brought it here because he thought it would be undiscovered for longer here than any other place he could think of. Or perhaps because he wanted to be here in the world to which he went.

All the disasters I'd been imagining would probably happen now, with Gregson beyond our control. But it was too late, or too soon, to worry about them.

My other problem remained—what to do with the truck.

I tried to phone Tony, but the hospital staff wouldn't let me talk to him. They said I should write a letter.

I wrote a letter once. I can't remember when, or who it was to, but I know I wrote a letter. I could probably do it again.

First I sold the Buick. Then I took the truck to Chicago, had it crated and stored in a warehouse. That way I could get it and the equipment

in it if I wanted it, or if necessary destroy it before Tony got his hands on it.

The problem was postponed once again.

I wrote guardedly to Tony, telling him what had happened to Gregson, not mentioning the truck, asking if I should return to Shehanta.

He wrote back saying he was getting on fine, that he'd guessed Gregson would do that, and that he'd write again when he wanted me to bring the truck back to Shehanta. Meantime I was to stay in the Chicago apartment and take care of it.

Mamie and I took care of it all right.

I should have known better than to try to outsmart Tony. He knew I had the truck safe. If I hadn't, I'd have said so. I wondered what he meant when he said he'd known Gregson would do that.

Weeks passed. I didn't write again. Tony didn't write again. And in a warehouse, a crated truck stood gathering dust.

Then a wire came from Tony: *Arriving Saturday.*

"You'd better not be here when he arrives, honey," I told Mamie. "Let's surprise him some other time, huh?"

Mamie was sweet and un-

derstanding, to my surprise. Maybe it was because she had gotten me around to thinking about marriage, but not speaking about it yet.

Tony came in leaning on two sticks. He was overweight and bronzed, not pale as I expected.

"It's good to see you, Boss," I said.

He grinned. "Strangely enough, it's good to see you too, Mack."

"What do you mean?"

"I never thought that if ever I turned honest, you'd still be around."

I didn't quite know how to take that, so I let it go by.

"Where's the truck, Mack?" he asked.

"Crated, in a warehouse," I said weakly.

He nodded. "I knew all along that if Brian did run out on us, he'd pick that way. After all, in this world the credit for the whole affair is split between us. In another world, it would be all his. So I fixed the machines."

"You fixed them?" I said joyfully. "So that he didn't get anywhere, you mean? So that he just disappeared into space?"

Tony was grinning at me again. "Would I do a thing like that to a friend, Mack? No, I simply set the machine

so that no matter what he did, short of dismantling it to make sure it was all right, he'd land in Earth VI."

"Why Earth VI?"

"Because there both Annette and I were killed."

Tony seemed to think that explained everything, but it wasn't enough for me.

"There are two Brian Gregsons in Earth VI now," Tony said patiently, "but no Tony Mantell. My guess is, they'll fight over their research program. But without me they'll get nowhere. I'm not boasting, Mack. I just happened to want Annette so much I turned myself into a genius for a while."

"You mean—there isn't going to be any more jumping between worlds?"

"My guess is no."

"But . . . Annette?"

Tony stopped grinning. "Gregson was right," he said quietly. "He didn't understand what love was, but he was right. That was never going to work."

The doorbell rang. "Answer that, Mack," said Tony casually.

I opened the door and there was Diana.

"So you're Mack," she said. "Tony, he's not as ugly as all that."

I blushed a little, not at what she said, but at the memory of how she had looked the last time I had seen her. At least, not her, but another Diana. This one was respectably dressed—except that it would be twenty years before Diana could be respectably dressed.

"Heavens, he's going red," Diana said. "Tony, have my pants fallen off or something?"

I turned back to Tony, questioningly.

"The Smiths found out I was in Shehanta," said Tony almost defensively. "Naturally they asked me to stay with them when I could be moved. Diana looked after me. You'd never believe how much she did for me."

"I would," I said.

Tony caught my eye, and I realized that Diana didn't know about the plans Tony had had for bringing another Annette to this Earth.

"That truck," Tony said. "At least, the things in it. Will you see that they're dismantled and smashed?"

"I'll do it," I said happily, "personally."

"Trucks, shucks," said Diana disgustedly. "Tony, do I let Mack congratulate me? Do I let him kiss me?"

"No," said Tony firmly.

I must have looked dense, for Diana raised her left hand and I saw the ring on it. I also saw the headlines on the newspaper she held in her hand.

Rudely I tore it from her, showed it to Tony. The streamer screamed: ENGLISH CROWN JEWELS STOLEN.

Tony snatched the paper from me. Then he laughed. "It's okay, Mack," he said, relieved. "Somebody's *really* stolen the English Crown Jewels."

Diana looked at me, then at Tony. We all laughed, though only two of us knew what we were laughing about.

THE END

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FAN 5-0

# THE DEVIL'S DUE

By DONALD MOFFITT

*Sold your soul to the Devil lately?  
Here's an ingenious way to beat Old  
Nick at his own game.*

**F**OSTER had one consuming ambition: it was to be rich. Very often he would have dreams in which he wallowed naked in huge piles of coins. When he woke up in the morning he would be sick and weak and covered with sweat. Still, he cherished those dreams; he lived for them. They were all he was likely to have, he sometimes reflected bitterly, because at the age of forty-six he had been an accounting clerk in the same firm for over twenty years. In all that time he had never been late for work, and he had been absent only once, when he had food poisoning. When he returned, after three days, he found that no one had noticed his absence except the head accountant, who kept the records for that sort of thing.

An incident like that makes a man think about himself, and the effect it had on Foster, naturally enough, was to make him feel futile. He thought about the desert his life had been and blamed everything on his lack of money. "If I'd had some money," he thought, "I should have lived differently." That night he had his old familiar dream about wallowing naked in coins, this time with a pleasant variation.

The next morning he felt decidedly cheerful. He hummed out loud while he boiled the usual solitary egg for his breakfast. He was a little worried because it was not like him to be cheerful in the morning. Foster did not know it, but a certain process, a chemical reaction of the spir-

it, had taken place in him the night before.

"Good morning," he said to Miss Attlewurst, the switchboard operator. "Good morning," he said to Mr. Warrace, the head accountant. Then he hung up his hat and coat with a flourish and sat down at his high desk without bothering to don his sleeve protectors. He hummed to himself while he added up figures. Mr. Warrace stood watching him for some minutes, then walked over and stopped behind him. "Foster," he said. "What's got into you?"

It was a very good question, but Foster simply didn't know the answer. So he just went on humming, and old Mr. Warrace, after waiting the better part of a minute, shook his head and walked away. Foster got very little work done that morning, and at a quarter to twelve he put on his hat and coat, regardless of the shocked stares of his colleagues. Moreover, on the way out he patted Miss Attlewurst on the cheek.

When a man like Foster has an upheaval, he has it all the way. He took a cocktail before lunch and several after, and all in all he was three quarters of an hour late in getting back to the office. As if that were not bad enough,

he left an hour early. The excuse he gave, when Mr. Warrace stopped him at the door, was that the columns of figures depressed him. Mr. Warrace stepped instantly aside, sure that Foster had gone mad.

Foster had not gone mad, however. He had simply made up his mind to sell his soul to the devil.

"But how do you go about attracting the devil's attention?" he asked himself. He leafed through his bank book for the answer, remembering that in its pages he had always found truthful answers to his most important questions; answers like: "No, you don't have enough for a cruise to Bermuda," and "No, you can't buy a sports car." This time, the bank book told him he had just enough money for a one-way ticket to Arizona. "Saint Jerome in the desert!" he cried, in a flash of insight. It was clear as a bell. The devil appeared to ascetics, in order to tempt them.

It was with a sense of impending success that he disembarked at a small railroad stop in Arizona. With an admirable absence of display he walked out into the desert, took off his clothes, folded them neatly under a cactus,

and draped his loins in sackcloth. "Now we shall see," he said with unspeakable satisfaction. In the weeks that followed he starved himself, suffered thirst, castigated his spirit, practiced elementary flagellation, rolled in a cactus patch, and otherwise performed such penances as would do credit to a first rate ascetic. But it was all in vain. The devil refused to put in an appearance.

Foster was beginning to despair when he noticed a speck on the horizon. This gradually resolved itself into a solitary figure trudging toward him. In a minute or two an old sourdough stood before him, leading a donkey. "Well son," said the old sourdough, "it appears you've got yourself in a fix."

Foster searched the other's grizzled face intently. He immediately recognized, by something in the old sourdough's eyes, that this was in fact the devil himself. "I want to be rich," he said, making no bones about it.

"Well now," said the devil, "I like your approach. Direct. Businesslike. You know what the usual price is, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes," Foster said impatiently. "Let's get down to details."

"Exactly how much money

would you want?" the devil said gaily.

"As much as I'll ever need."

"Excellent, excellent," beamed the devil, "I can see we're going to get along, my dear fellow."

"There is just one detail," Foster hesitated.

The devil frowned darkly. "What's that?"

"I've wasted twenty years of my life," Foster said. "I want you to give them back to me."

"Why certainly, certainly, dear boy." The devil perceptibly relaxed. He had agreed so readily that Foster was sorry he hadn't asked for more, but before he had time to think, the devil had whipped out a small parchment document that looked very much like a college diploma. "Now, my dear fellow, just a small formality; you shall have to sign this in your own blood." The devil produced a large needle, sterilized it by holding it for a moment over a small flame that emanated obediently from his forefinger, and jabbed Foster in the forearm.

Foster signed dutifully. The devil inspected his signature with insulting care, then handed Foster a large sealed envelope. "Go to New York,"

the devil said. "When you get there, open these instructions." Then he started off, leading the donkey.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Foster cried. "How do I get there?"

"Look under that cactus, dear fellow," the devil said, moving off again.

Foster moved toward the indicated cactus. Something occurred to him. "Why did you appear to me as an old sourdough?" he shouted.

"It's my sense of style," the devil called back. He reached the horizon more quickly than Foster would have thought possible, which indicated that, after all, his disguise was not so perfect as he had imagined.

Foster soon discovered that whatever the devil's private conceits, he was a gentleman and a man of his word. For on digging at the roots of the cactus (it must be confessed that Foster began this with some petty apprehension) he found a small leatheroid bag full of Spanish dollars. To be sure, the amount was not much, but there was, after all, enough for train fare to New York and a little over. Consoling himself with the thought that he would soon be rich to the exact measure of his dreams, he set off on foot for the little railroad stop

from which he had disembarked only a few weeks before. The stationmaster-telegrapher, after getting over his astonishment, made several humorous remarks about Foster's sackcloth costume. Foster bore the stationmaster's wit until it began to grow repetitive; he then silenced the man with a handful of Spanish dollars, which bought him a pair of blue jeans, a flannel shirt, and a pair of the stationmaster's old shoes. "Not the way for a millionaire to dress," Foster thought, "but it'll soon be changed. And this way I won't be such a mark for witty comments."

When he arrived in New York Foster found that the envelope the devil had given him contained an endless list of stocks and bonds, each with a date opposite its name; there was also the name and address of a broker. He marched into the broker's office in his blue jeans and flannel shirt and spent the last of his Spanish dollars on a few shares of the first stock on the list. The next day he found that he had made enough money to buy the indicated number of shares of the second stock on the list, with about enough left over to buy a suit he had thought-

lessly admired on the way to the broker's office.

This, he soon found, was a preview of the way his finances worked thereafter. Whenever Foster bought something, he found that his earnings, as if on signal, expanded to include the price of the article. When he moved from his first shyly chosen hotel to a more lavish suite, his income increased to meet the rent. When he bought a car, he found the down payment appear, as if by magic, in his bank book. Without fail, his holdings would soar at the precise moment of his buying some expensive bauble for one of the expensive young ladies he was meeting these days.

It began to get Foster down, this having just enough and no more; he felt that he wanted some leeway. Still, his sense of justice forced him to admit that the devil was living up to his bargain: he recalled the words *as much as I'll ever need*. He paid by check; there always seemed to be enough money in his pockets for waiters' tips and that sort of thing.

Foster went on in this fashion for several years. It is hardly necessary to describe his yacht, his three country

homes, his mistresses, his lavish parties, his fabulous and highly theatrical trip around the world. These have already been chronicled by the tabloids, whose readers avidly devoured the sixty-point headlines reading:

MYSTERY STOCK SPECULATOR USES CRUSHED DIAMONDS FOR "GRAVEL" DRIVEWAY, or MILLIONAIRE PLAYBOY HIRES BOSTON SYMPHONY FOR BED-TIME MUSIC. He was the subject of heated discussion by Wall Street, which wanted to know his system; by the most brow-beaten subway commuter, who saw in him the realization of a private fantasy. Foster became a symbol.

"Fat lot of good it does me to be a symbol," he complained one morning to his bleary-eyed image in the mirror. He wished that he had made a few other stipulations in his diabolic bargain, among them an immunity to hangovers. The fact is, Foster had not been sleeping well of late. He no longer had his dream about piles of coins; he now dreamt of wallowing forever in the fires of Hell. He imagined these fires with a clarity that surprised him.

Very carefully, like an ageing movie star, he inspected himself in the mirror. As far as he could tell he had not

gained a single new grey hair, a single new wrinkle. If the devil kept his bargain, Foster had, he calculated, the better part of twenty years. No doubt through some fatal defect in his nature, he regarded these as twenty years without savour.

"What an idiot!" he groaned aloud. "I ought to have asked for more."

He took to reading Faust, to studying the lives of the saints. He began to hang about with all sorts of unsavoury characters, such as penitent alcoholics and higher-ups in the Salvation Army. He no longer shaved every day—his appearance seemed unimportant.

Worst of all, he took to haunting his broker's offices. He began to fancy that there was something definitely satanic in the appearance of that individual. The broker, he thought, was too swarthy, too hairy, too gentlemanly; his eyes glowed too brightly. He noticed that there were a great number of frantic young men continually rushing in and out. These young men never seemed to be disappointed as to the progress of their fortunes; to the contrary, their disappointment seemed to stem from a deeper source. They seemed, he imagined,

haunted by some dark apprehension. In the end he was convinced that this broker was none other than the devil's own agency on earth. With a groan of despair he left the office and had his chauffeur drive him to one of his country estates.

There he sought forgetfulness in the arms of one of his mistresses, a beautiful girl named Angela. He had met Angela in a nightclub while he was lighting a cigar with a hundred dollar bill. She had been attracted by the flame and had come over and introduced herself. "Angela," he now said, "what would you do if Daddy-cake had to go away for a long time?"

"Why Daddy-cake," she said, "I think I'd just die." She pouted so excellently that it was heart-rending to see it.

"What would you do," Foster persisted, "if there were no more diamond bracelets?"

This raised such a tempest on Angela's part that in the end Foster had to buy her another diamond bracelet to reassure her. The effort was not wasted, however. Foster had the beginning of an idea; he began to feel positively cool again.

The idea was a simple one and a pleasure to carry out.

He increased his expenditures to a degree that made even his previous excesses seem illiberal and pinchfist. How shabby, how scrubby to have only three country estates! He bought eight more. He acquired a famous ocean liner for use as a fishing craft. He saved a certain European country from bankruptcy by purchasing the crown jewels; these he gave to Angela to wear at the opening of one of the bad plays he was backing. He bought an entire town in Ohio and used to fly there once a month in order to taste the apple pies of a Mrs. C. R. Hosley.

The figures in his bank book began to waver, and once his stocks were all of three quarters of an hour late in increasing so that he could buy a priceless painting. Foster felt himself to be on the brink of success: it was the same feeling he'd had while rolling in a cactus patch that time in the Arizona desert.

He was not disappointed. One night, as he lay in his Louis XIV bed, there came an impeccable knock at the door, and in walked the devil in the form of a butler. "Really, my dear fellow," said the devil, "this can't go on, you know."

"As much as I'll need," Foster quoted imperturbably.

"Do you think your little soul is worth that much to me?" said the devil, turning nasty. "It was pretty shriveled and dried up when I bought it."

"All souls weigh the same," Foster said, and immediately knew, by the vicious expression on the devil's face, that he was right. Fortified, he went on: "A bargain's a bargain."

The devil turned and stamped out in a towering rage. Foster immediately called Angela and proposed marriage to her on the theory that she would be a more expensive wife than mistress. The ceremony took place the next day, and, short notice or no short notice, it was indescribable. The flowers alone required eighteen special trains composed entirely of refrigerated tankcars, and every hot-house on the East coast was denuded of its blossoms.

That night, with a fiendish lack of delicacy, the devil visited them in their bed-chamber. He was in such a fury that he forgot his sense of style and appeared with a clap of thunder, and in a cloud of brimstone as well. His real shape was unspeakably frightful, and Angela fainted dead away.

"Foster," the devil said in a voice of wrath, "you're ruining me."

"So much the worse for you," Foster said, not at all put off by the devil's unguessed-at appearance. He was sure it was just a pose.

"Be reasonable," the devil pleaded. "Men make the money. There's only so much of it to go around."

"You old fraud," Foster said, emboldened by the devil's whining tone. "You're supposed to have wealth without limit."

"We can work this out," the devil said.

"No we can't," Foster said firmly. "And right now I feel like owning a place on the Riviera." Straightaway he reached for the bedside phone and ordered his broker to buy him the home. Angela, who had now recovered consciousness, watched the proceedings with the liveliest interest.

"I am prepared," Foster went on after he had hung up,

"to buy up the whole Riviera if necessary."

"All right," the devil fumed, "all right." He thrust a hand into the nasty jungle of hair on his chest and drew out a square of parchment. He ripped it passionately in two and flung the pieces on the bed. Foster had just enough time to steal a quick look at them and make sure the devil was not playing a sly trick before they turned brown at the edges and charred away to ashes.

"Temper, temper," said Angela, whose habits in dealing with sulky men had got the better of her. When the devil heard this, his rage knew no bounds and he vanished dramatically in a burst of flame, leaving an unpleasant smell behind. As for Foster and Angela, they sold the royal crown jewels and a few other trinkets and retired in luxury to their place on the Riviera, where they may be seen to this day.

#### THE END





## According to you...

Dear Editor:

I'm writing to tell you what I thought of the January, February and March *Fantastics*. The January issue was superb! "The Funnel of God" was the best story you've had in a long time. Another sort of special story was "In the Circle of Nowhere." All in all, a great issue.

The February issue wasn't as good, but I liked it. "I Want You, I Want You" was very good. Leiber's "Mariana" was a small gem. "First Born," "Off His Rocker," and the others were also great.

I didn't, however, care too much for the March issue. I failed to see how "The Botticelli Horror" lived up to its build-up as a Gothic novel. The other stories didn't appeal to me too much. But the April issue should be good, from its previews.

I'm a pretty persistent fantasy fan, and I can't admit to defeat. There seems to be a new flare for fantasy and horror. More and more fantasy pocketbooks are on the newsstands. A new magazine, "Shock" is taking advantage of this new craze, and is reprinting from "Weird Tales," and the other old horror mags. I'd like to see (as would other fans, from the looks of their letters) fantasy in *Fantastic*. Maybe, if you think it would fold if it included fantasy monthly, you could have every third issue reserved for fantasy, magic and other weird stories. I've recently learned that any pleas for anything other than s-f would be futile. But still, in view of the fact that there is perhaps a new market out for fantasy, maybe we devotees of fantasy won't be disappointed. With a little encouragement authors might again turn out witchcraft, vampire and magical type stories.

If you don't think this would be too wise an investment (tri-monthly fantasy) maybe there's a chance of having a col-

lection in the form of a pocketbook, of the best fantasy from *Fantastic*. There are probably a good deal of fans who, like myself, got a late start with your magazine and wish to read what they missed.

I hope you don't think I'm really trying to run the magazine, or object to some of the criticism. I'm just trying to see a few new fantasies.

Jeff Newman  
28 Stewart Avenue  
Nutley 10, New Jersey

• *We can't make any rash promises, however a few new fantasies aren't too much to ask for and the chances are that from time to time you'll be seeing some in Fantastic.*

Dear Editor:

I am left utterly speechless at the cover change on *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories* by Ziff-Davis. I thoroughly enjoyed McIntosh's "Merlin" and all of the rest of the short stories.

But here's a good one for the critics. Did that front cover really sell the April issue?

James W. Ayers  
609 First St.  
Attalla, Ala.

• *You'll have to wait for the critics to answer that.*

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter to you in less than a month, but I felt that I just had to write about your title change. First I would like to commend you. It takes a lot of guts to do such a thing.

I have been reading some of the complaints offered due to this change over. For the most part I think they are ill-grounded. As you say good fantasy is hard to come by. The reason good fantasy is hard to come by is that there is not enough money in fantasy so writers overlook it. The reason there is not enough money in fantasy is because no one reads it. I count myself among this group. People should realize that you have expenses to think about and cannot print profitless stories.

I have (at least I hope I have) a reasonably firm hold on

reality. Fantasy does not encourage this, while s-f, even if it says some pretty fantastic things, has at least some basis in reality. For this reason, I advocate the dispersal of at least some of the fantasy printed.

This, of course, does not mean that you should not print some fantasy. Occasionally good stories are written, but publication should be in moderation.

John Olenski  
8 Henrietta St.  
Brantford, Ont., Canada

• *You're absolutely right, whatever you're saying. Our hold on reality has slipped a bit today.*

Dear Editor:

I have read Bob Bloch's "Funnel of God" and I feel it is time to write a letter to a s-f magazine to tell you how much I have enjoyed reading the stories published by *Fantastic* and its sister magazine *Amazing* ever since I began reading s-f stories in English.

The "Funnel of God" is a real and truthful proof that s-f can be used as a tool of social criticism. But, to tell the truth, very few times have I read a story so full of social criticism that shows the stupidity and falsehood that a true seeker of THE TRUTH can find along his way.

As to the other stories in that particular issue, January, 1960, I enjoyed Keith Laumer's "Diplomat-At-Arms" and "In The Circle of Nowhere" very much. The other short stories were amusing, especially "Abide With Me," by Will Worthington. The illustrations are very good and the cover rather good.

When this letter is published, I hope that some of the readers who share my devotion to science fiction will show some interest in corresponding with this South American neighbor.

Hector R. Pessina  
Poste Restante/Correo Central  
Argentina

• *We trust some Fantastic readers will be interested in writing to a literal aficonado south of the border.*





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